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# Convert Traffic to Purchase: the Impact of Social Network Information on Trust and Purchase Intention in Social Commerce

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**Abstract:** As social commerce gain popularity, many of them are focused on how to drive huge amount of traffic in social media to online retailer. In this study we adopt experiment method to analyze whether information content and source influence perceived credibility and quality of information, which would then influence consumers' trust and their purchase intention in the social commerce. 203 respondents are recruited and randomly dispatched into 4 treatment groups. The data analysis reveals that experiential information obtains higher source credibility and higher perceived information quality than non-experiential information; user-generated-content (UGC) obtains higher source credibility than marketer-generated-content (MGC), but the correlation between information source and perceived information quality is not significant; both credibility of sources and perceived information quality are positively related to trust and purchase intention in the social commerce. Suggestions have been made for designing social commerce website.

Keywords: social network information, social commerce, traffic conversion, trust

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Social Commerce* is a combination of e-commerce and social media[1], where the users generate content to help others make decisions on purchasing. One form of social commerce is rooted in social network communities, such as Xiaohongshu.com (ref. as XHS) and Mogujie.com (ref. as MGJ) in China. Originally, they are online communities which allow users to share their personal experience and preferences. As social network sites are driving an increasing volume of traffic to retail sites[2], they started to develop their own e-commerce to take advantage of this social influence based on their huge amount of users and user generated content. Then comes to the research questions: How to drive social media traffic to online retailer? What make users trust what others say and what they recommended in the social media and then go to buy on the retail site?

It is reported that XHS is higher than MGJ in terms of the sales volume, the purchase conversion rate, and the repurchase rate. To study why users in XHS could be successfully converted to consumers, we compared the two platforms. The content of MGJ community has an obvious intention of guiding users to purchase and purchase links are attached to the recommended products. Thus community content seems to be generated by marketers. On the contrary, users' comments in XHS are more of users' personal experiences and no purchase links are attached. Moreover, products sold on shopping page are procured by XHS according to users' recommendation rate and not all the recommended products in the community could be bought. Do information type and perceived information source impact on consumers' trust and purchase intention in social commerce?

In this study, experiment method is adopted to analyze whether information content and source influence perceived credibility and quality of information, which would then influence consumers' trust on the social commerce and their intention to purchase. Information type is divided into experiential ones and promotional ones from the perspectives of Experience Consumption Theory, and source of information are categorized into UGC and MGC from the peripheral clues in the Elaboration Likelihood Model. 4 treatment groups (2X2) are designed with descriptions of cosmetics in the social commerce.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL MODEL**

Leitner & Grechenig propose that social commerce provide an collaboration platform for consumers, thus making them able to get suggestions, to find appropriate products and to make a purchase decision [3]. Shen & Eder think that social commerce help consumers discovering, integrating and sharing product information, and accordingly making purchase decisions [4].

### **2.1 Users' community on online shopping**

Researchers have great interests in how social network can promote collaboration among users and online sales [5-8]. Uncertainty has been viewed as a severe obstacle for online shopping [9-11]. Some tools such as visualization system and cooperative shopping system can help consumers to deal with the uncertainty [12]. Users' community can also help eliminating uncertainty and support decision making process through sharing product information and providing ratings, interests or personalized recommendations based on purchase history and usage experience. Amblee and Bui prove that social commerce websites use word-of-mouth to affect the reputations of products, and used friends' recommendations, comments and products' ratings to assist purchase decisions [13]. Brich and Holsing analyze the relationship between social networking and online shopping and find that there is a positive correlation between page views, ratings, tags and possibility of click-out (following a link to an online shop) [14]. Therefore, the information on the social commerce website can help eliminating uncertainty, and thus assist purchase decision.

### **2.2 Trust in the social commerce platform and intention to purchase**

In the context of online shopping, uncertainty makes trust a critical factor influencing consumers' intention to buy. Mayer et al. think that trust is the willingness to take the risks rising from uncertainty [15]. Yaobin Lu et al [16] find that building trust among virtual community members is an effective way to establish trust in the C2C website or vendor, and these two types of trust would further influence consumers' intentions to get information and purchase. Hsiao et al [17] find that trust in a website will directly influence consumers' intention to purchase from the website and indirectly through increasing trust in product recommendation in the website and intention to purchase the recommended products.

We can infer that users' trust in the recommendation in the community of the social commerce platform will give rise to the trust in shops of social commerce platform, and thus they will intend to purchase on the social commerce platform. Therefore, we proposed the hypotheses below:

H1: Consumers' trust in the social commerce platform has a positive impact on their intention to purchase.

### **2.3 Source credibility, perceived information quality and trust in the social commerce platform**

What kind of information in users' community can help building consumers' trust in recommended products or websites? According to the Theory of Reasoned Action, rational people will take into account all kinds of information and possible consequences of their behavior before they shape their attitude. Therefore, users' attitudes toward social community platform are mainly based on their judgment on the information in the community, and decide whether to trust in the social commerce and whether to make a purchase.

According to Elaboration Likelihood Mode (ELM) [18], information receivers are impossible to process each piece of information he received elaborately, due to limitation of individual cognition. When an individual is capable of and willing to process information elaborately, the central route of processing information plays the key role and he is more concerned with information quality. When an individual is incapable of and unwilling to process information elaborately, peripheral route, such as the source of the information (source credibility and source similarity), plays the key role [19].

According to Hovland's Communication and Persuasion Theory[20], receivers may understand the information based on their perception and judgement on the sources of information, and a highly credible source is more effective in persuasion. As one dimension to judge the spreaders of information, source credibility make information more influential by enhance its value during the dissemination process [21-24].

Therefore, information source credibility serve as an important peripheral clue that can influence individuals' judgment on information[18, 20]. Particularly in online environment, in order to avoid being confused among huge amount of information, individuals need to rely on peripheral clue such as source credibility to assess information [25, 26]. If people think that the information providers are reliable and professional, they will more trust the information.

H2a Information source credibility has a positive impact on users' trust in social commerce platforms.

According to ELM Theory, in high elaboration mode, persuasion tends to follow the central route and information quality will then become the decisive factor influencing the dissemination of information. Lee finds that higher quality of word of mouth has greater influence [27]. When the information quality within a community is perceived high and helpful, the social commerce platform will be seen as operates from the perspective of consumers. When there is full of useless information, consumer won't develop a favorable impression on the shopping platform. Therefore, perceived quality of information will also influence consumers' trust in the shopping platform. We assume that:

H2b Perceived information quality has a positive impact on users' trust in social commerce platforms.

#### **2.4 Information content and perceived quality, source credibility of information**

In the Attribution Theory, Heider[28] pointed out that everyone would try to explain the causes of their own or others' behavior according to some clues. Users in the community are often anonymous, so consumers will form their own perceptions about the source credibility according to information content features. In online consumer community, some contents may describe the real experiences of using products, while some may just copy the marketing notes or functions introduction from the company. The former often contains using experience, feelings, fitness, perceptions of advantages and shortcomings with user's personal tone; the latter often describes ingredients, functions of the products or advocating use efficacy with a promoting tone.

Source credibility usually contains two dimensions: trustworthiness and expertise [20]. Trustworthiness refers to the confidence in the information publisher for providing information in an objective and honest manner. Expertise refers to whether the communicator seems to possess enough knowledge to support his assertions. [29] If the content is about personal experience, consumers will infer that the information publisher has used the product, thus has enough knowledge about the usage of the product. Their suggestions will be thought helpful and objective. Consumers will easily attribute their behavior to internal motivations such as enjoying sharing and believe that such behavior has nothing to do with business. Even if consumers find similar experiences or life backgrounds in the content, they will more likely to trust the source[30]. However, if the content has no personal experience or even has promoting elements, consumers will attribute it to external motivations such as being driven by economic interests. They will question the authenticity and objectivity of the contents, which results in a low level of source credibility. Therefore, we assume that:

H3a Experiential information obtains higher source credibility than non-experiential information

Information quality refers to its accuracy, comprehensive, consistency, etc. Before making decisions, consumers are always eager to know whether it fit me, how does it being used. Others' using experiences contains more details such as aftereffect of use, fitness or compares with similar products. These kind of information are just consistent with consumers' information requirement. In contrast, the non-experiential information only provides product instructions in an official tone. Consumers cannot get enough knowledge on

consequences of using the products. That makes them not confident in stopping searching and making decision. That results in a lower perceived quality of this kind of information. Therefore, we assume that:

H3b Experiential information shows a higher perceived quality than non-experiential information

## 2.5 Information source and source credibility, perceived information quality

In the field of community in social commerce platform, we focus more on whether the contents come from users or marketers. Some studies have classified community information into user-generated-content (UGC) and marketer-generated-content (MGC), and analyzed their causes, influences as well as the degree of consumers' trust in them [19, 30-32]. While sales personnel often have more knowledge on a product than an inexperienced friend, many consumers doubt salespeople's trustworthiness but would consider a good friend trustworthy [29].

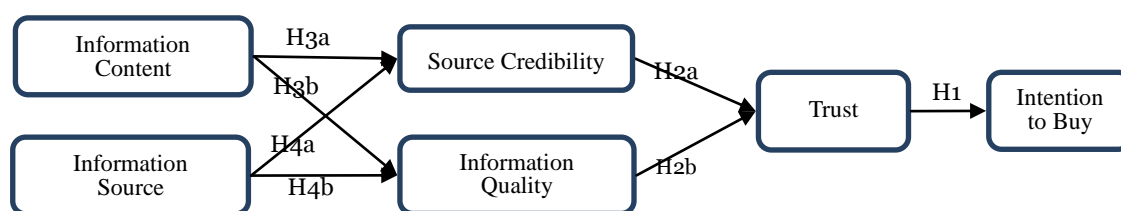
According to Attribution Theory, people infer the communicator's motive based on different situational clues [33, 34]. If the information comes from marketers, consumers may doubt their trustworthiness and consider they are driven by economic interests. But if the information comes from other consumers, people will attribute their motive as enjoying sharing and interaction, etc. The information will easily be trusted because there is no potential conflict of interest. Similarly, under the ELM model, consumers will use peripheral clues—information sources, to understand and process community contents. The credibility of MGC is questionable, for MGC usually emphasizes the positive aspects of products [35]. Therefore, we assume that:

H4a UGC obtains higher source credibility than MGC

Marketers often have more comprehensive information on a product than ordinary consumers [36]. MGC is more capable of providing more relative and professional information thoroughly, so that consumers can spend less time searching and filter information. Different consumers may have different perceptions or experiences with the product. Their opinions are often not consistent or even conflict. UGC are often subjective and has random quality, thus take consumers more time to filter and compare. Therefore, we assume that:

H4b UGC shows a lower perceived information quality than MGC

Based on Communication and Persuasion Theory, ELM and Attribution Theory, we put forward the following model to explore how social network influence online shopping in a social commerce platform.



## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Treatment Design

In this study, we adopt an experiment method to analyze whether information content and source influence perceived credibility and information quality, which would then influence consumers' trust in the social commerce and their intention to purchase. We conduct a pretest and a focus group interview to determine the treatments, experiment materials and objects. Finally, we divide information content into experiential and non-experiential ones based on Experience Consumption Theory, and categorize information source into UGC and MGC from the peripheral clues in ELM model. Thus, 4 treatment cells (2X2) are designed. MGC is defined as content with a click-out button linking to a shopping store, but UGC without that linkage. The content are also examined by pretests and interview to get clearer identification. We finally choose cosmetic products as experiment objects because they are very popular in the social commerce and are high involvement products. In

this research, we recruit 203 respondents, and dispatch almost 50 people to each treatment group randomly.

### 3.2 Measurement

Table 1 provides an overview of the constructs, their measurements and the sources of the measurements. Each variable is measured by 7 points Likert scale.

**Table 1. Measurement**

Construct	Items	Sources
Information Content	1. Above content is the publisher's own experience 2. Above content is not the publisher's own experience	Self-developed
Information Source	1. Above content has no shopping chart linking to an online shop, which means the content is generated by users. 2. Above content has a shopping chart linking to an online shop, which means the content is generated by marketers.	Self-developed
Source Credibility	1. I think the content in the above online community is Unreliable                      Reliable Dishonest                      Honest Untrustworthy                      Trustworthy 2. I think the comment in the above online community is knowledgeable. 3. I think the comment in the online community is provided by an expert in the field.	Wu and Shaffer 1987[37][44]
Perceived Information Quality	1. The content in the above community is extensive, and provide comprehensive information about the product. 2. The content in the above community is highly relevant to the product. 3. Content in the above online community that is related to the details of the product is accurate.	Bailey and Pearson 1983[38][45]
Trust	1. I believe the mobile shopping platform will abide by its commitment to customers. 2. I believe this online shopping platform takes customers' best interests close to heart. 3. This online shopping platform is trustworthy. 4. This online shopping platform will not cheat consumers.	Jarvenpaa et al. 2000[39][46]
Intention to buy	1. I would like to buy products or services that I favor on this online shopping platform. 2. I will probably buy products or services that I favor from this platform in the future.	Lim et al. 2006[47]

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Single dimension test and manipulative check

Table 2 shows the result of single dimension test, in which the minimum value of the initial eigenvalues in principal component analysis of 1.626(bigger than 1), and the maximum value of the second eigenvalues is 0.623(under 1). This means that each observable variable in the group is affected by the same standardized latent variable.

**Table2 Single Dimension Test**

Variables	Initial Eigenvalues	Second Eigenvalues
Information Content	1.938	0.062
Information Sources	1.961	0.039
Source Credibility	3.499	0.581
Perceived Information Quality	2.102	0.567
Trust	2.868	0.623
Intention to Buy	1.626	0.374

Manipulative check is performed to examine whether subjects exposed to a certain manipulation treatment responded significantly differently. Manipulation checks on information content show that subjects exposed to experiential information indeed agreed that it is publisher's own experience (item1:t =21.6,  $p < 0.01$ ; item2:t=26.4,  $p < 0.01$ ), compared to those subjects exposed to non-experiential information. Manipulation checks on information source show that subjects exposed to content without shopping chart indeed agreed that it is generated by users(item1:t =27.2,  $p < 0.01$ ; item2:t=26.3,  $p < 0.01$ ), compared to those subjects exposed to content with shopping chart.

## 4.2 Measurement model assessment

We used partial least squares (PLS) to assess the measurement and structure. As shown in Table 3, the composite reliabilities (CR, over 0.6), Cronbach's alphas (over 0.7), and average variances extracted (AVE, over 0.50) by the constructs indicated that they had acceptable levels of reliability and convergent validity. Third, each indicator have a higher loading on its own respective construct than on any other constructs (the result is omitted), and the values of square root of AVE on the diagonal are larger than the correlation below the diagonal (see right part of table 3), which demonstrate convergent and discriminant validity.

**Table 3 Reliability test**

	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE	Information Content	Information Sources	Source Credibility	Information Quality	trust	Intention to Buy
Information Content	0.968	0.983	0.967	0.983					
Information Sources	0.98	0.99	0.981	0.021	0.99				
Information Quality	0.785	0.875	0.701	0.226	0.247	0.837			
Source Credibility	0.892	0.921	0.7	0.19	0.136	0.75	0.837		
Trust	0.868	0.91	0.717	0.18	0.189	0.811	0.777	0.847	
Intention to Buy	0.77	0.897	0.813	0.223	0.222	0.761	0.749	0.806	0.902

## 4.3 Structure model assessment and hypothesis test

The structure model is tested using PLS bootstrap. The bootstrapping sample was 500. As shown in Table 4, all the hypothesis are verified except for H4b.

**Table 4 Conclusion**

Path	Path Coefficient	P-value	Hypothesis		
Trust -> Intention to Buy	0.806	0.000	H1	The consumers' trust has a positive correlation with their intention to purchase.	Valid
Source Credibility -> Trust	0.521	0	H2a	Source credibility has a positive correlation with users' trust.	Valid
Information Quality -> Trusts	0.386	0	H2b	Perceived information quality has a positive correlation with users' trust	Valid
Information Content -> Source Credibility	0.221	0.001	H3a	Experiential information obtains higher source credibility than non-experiential information	Valid
Information Content -> Information Quality	0.187	0.002	H3b	Experiential information shows a higher perceived quality than non-experiential information	Valid
Information Sources -> Source Credibility	0.242	0	H4a	UGC obtains higher source credibility than MGC	Valid
Information Sources -> Information Quality	0.132	0.055	H4b	UGC shows a lower perceived information quality than MGC	Invalid

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This research study consumers' perceptions of source credibility and quality for different content and different source of information in online communities, and their influence on consumers' trust and purchase intention in social commerce platforms. And we concluded as follows:

Experiential information obtains higher source credibility than non-experiential information, because experiential information seems more expert and customers are more likely to resonate with experiential information and attribute publishers' behavior to some non-economic motivations. Furthermore, experiential information is perceived as higher quality than non-experiential information, because it contains real experience data and is more comprehensive. And the descriptions are more consistent with consumers' requirements of knowing real aftereffect of using.

UGC obtains higher source credibility than MGC, because consumers believe that they are similar with and have no conflict interest with other users in the community. However, the correlation between information source and perceived information quality is not significant. The result shows that although users who generate the content are more trustworthy than marketers, marketers are thought as knowing better about their products.

The quality of the contents generated by users has no significant difference with that of marketers.

Both credibility of sources and perceived quality of information are positively related to trust in the shopping platform. When the source credibility and perceived information quality are high, consumers have stronger trust in the recommendation in social network and then the social commerce platform. That means that consumers' trust improves if they think the publishers are speaking from an unbiased and objective stand. Consumers' trust will in turn improve their willingness to purchase on the social commerce platform.

## 6. SUGGESTIONS

This research offers managerial implications as follows: First, social commerce platform should encourage customers to post their real experience in the online community and reduce advertisings or promoting contents. These experiential contents can ensure information quality, help consumers making decision and increase user loyalty. Second, social commerce platform should build a healthy connection between social network and online shops in the platforms. In the long run, it is better to make social network relatively independent and prevent retailers take advantage of social network to promote their products. That means that adding click-out button toward online shops to community content is not encouraged.

## 7. LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has several limitations. First, this study did not thoroughly test factors that may influence source credibility and information quality. In future study, we will consider factors such as means of expression and the relation between social network and shops. Second, this study did not observe users for a certain period of time to measure the changes in their perception of information. Third, most sample came from smart phone users. In future studies, reliability can be improved through laboratory experiment. Forth, the empirical findings are from a study in China, so the generalizability of the research is limited.

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