

EMBS Master Thesis



The Role of Social Commerce in Europe: The Impact of Social Support, Trust and Flow Experience in Trust Performance

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ABSTRACT

Background: Thanks to the introduction of Web 2.0, the world experienced the arise of Social Network Sites, where people have the opportunity to share contents within a community, and to stay in touch. Firms, especially in the last decade, realized that these elements have a great potential when it comes to business applications. Therefore, what has been done recently, is merging e-commerce with social networks: Social Commerce. Although research in Asia highlighted the fact that suggestions from a community have a positive impact in shopping behavior, there is no trace whether this can be applicable in different areas of the globe.

Aim: This study aims to understand whether Social Support, being the basis of Social Commerce, positively influence Trust, hence sharing and online purchase intentions in the unexplored European continent.

Methodology: The project is conducted through a questionnaire to be spread online. Because of the lack in the knowledge of Europeans about Social Commerce, before answering, the respondents will have the opportunity to try a prototype, simulating the main functionalities of Social Commerce platforms.

Contributions: This study contributes enlarging upon the literature on Social Commerce and its business's application in Europe. It also expands on the role of Social Support in consumer behavior.

Keywords: Social Commerce; Social Network Sites; E-Commerce; Web 2.0; Social Support; Trust; Flow.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	iii
LIST OF TABLES	iii
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THEORETICAL FRAMING.....	3
2.1 Web 2.0, Social Media, and E-Commerce.....	3
2.2 Social Commerce	4
2.3 Electronic Word of Mouth	4
2.4 The Importance of Social Influence Online	5
2.4.1 Information social influence in Social Commerce.....	6
2.4.2 Normative social influence in Social Commerce.....	6
2.4.3 Antecedents of Social Influence: Social Support.....	7
2.5 Trust related theories.....	7
3. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES	8
3.1 Trust	8
3.2 Social Support	9
3.2.1 Emotional Support	9
3.2.2 Informational support.....	10
3.3 Trust Performance.....	10
3.3.1 Purchase Intention.....	10
3.3.2 Sharing Intention.....	11
3.4 Flow Experience	11
3.5 Literature Review table.....	13
4. METHODOLOGY.....	16
4.1 Research design.....	16

4.2 Sample description	16
4.3 Data collection	16
4.4 Data analysis procedure	22
5. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS	23
7. WORKPLAN	26
8. REFERENCES.....	27

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

e.g.	Exempli gratia
Electronic Word of Mouth	eWOM
Social Commerce	SC
Social Media	SM
Social Support	SS
UCG	User Generated Content
Word of Mouth	WOM
Theory of Reasoned Action	TRA

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – Proposed Research Model	Fehler! Textmarke nicht definiert.
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LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.....	13
Table 2.....	19
Table 3.....	26

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the world has experienced an exploitation of online purchases through Web 1.0 platforms, known as e-commerce. Due to the evolution of Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, Social Media started playing a fundamental role in the everyday life, and consequently, user-generated contents entered the purchasing decision. Hence a new concept has been developed: Social Commerce.

Social Commerce can be seen as the evolving process of e-commerce (Kooser, 2008; Curty & Zhang, 2011; Whang & Zang, 2012) and defined as “the online buying and selling activities initiated via Social Media, which entails business transactions through either Social Media (e.g., on a Facebook store) or other e-commerce sites” (Ng, 2013 – p.609). The McKinsey report of 2015 revealed that the Chinese population spend 78 minutes per day using platforms such as Social Commerce and makes about 50% of their buying decisions thanks to friends’ and relatives’ suggestions (Liu et al., 2015). Moreover, analyzing the result of a Social Commerce survey, 83% of online shoppers are willing to share shopping information with their friends, and 67% of online shoppers are likely to purchase more based on the recommendations they get from their peers (Marsden, 2009). Trusov (2009) observed that a shopping information received from a person that belong to the same group of affections, are perceived as more valuable than suggestions that came from strangers, therefore, this affects the online purchase.

“Social Commerce involves the use of Social Media that supports social interaction, communications, and user-generated content such as ratings and reviews, blogs, and microblogging to assist in the online buying, selling, and marketing of products and services” (Ng, 2013 – p.609). Social Commerce involves disciplines such as marketing, computer science, sociology and psychology and it has been explored widely by many researcher in the last years for what concerns: (a) business applications and business strategies (Serrano and Torres, 2010; Costa and Tavares, 2011); (b) its psychological impact (Michaelidou et al., 2011); (c) together with the impact on users’ behavioral beliefs (Grange and Benbasat, 2010).

In terms of Social Commerce, the ambition of the retailer is to transform the customer into a brand advocate. Simultaneously, the interest of the shopper is to conclude a better reasoned purchase (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Marsden, 2011). When the seller shares the consumer experience within his community, either or both of those goals are achieved (Ng, 2013). Although many studies investigated the role of Social Commerce in Asia when it comes to purchasing intention, there is a

significant gap in the knowledge of how this mechanism works in Europe. Indeed, much research highlighted the fact of being a circumscribed study as a limitation (Liu et al., 2019; Bugshan & Attar, 2020). Moreover, there is still a problem of terminology that surround the topic due to its innovative nature. Furthermore, even though Trust is a factor that strongly affect consumer behavior, its multidimensionality is an under investigated characteristic in the related field (Lin et al., 2019). As firms can gain a real competitive advantage thanks to this platform, especially if they are able to enter the market first, there is a consistent need to understand which are the elements that affects consumers' decision-making online.

This study will contribute on expanding literature on Social Commerce and clarifying the concept and the background around it. It examines the effect of Social Support, Trust and Flow Experience in Purchase Intention and Sharing Intention (Trust Performance) in an under investigated field: Europe. Understanding the reasons that lead consumers to engage in activities related to both constructs, contributes to the literature on social commerce (Chen & Shen, 2015). Also, this study contributes to theory claiming for empirical investigation on variables that influence consumer trust in social commerce, under the lens of the trust transference theory (Kim & Park, 2013).

This research will contribute to identifying factors related to trust between consumers and social commerce platforms. It can help businesses to develop new functionalities that increase social interactions, maximizing users' access to products offered on the platform (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013).

In this study first, an introduction of the main concept behind the research will be given: therefore, the evolution from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 is analyzed, together with Social Media (SM from hereafter) and E-Commerce. The definition of Social Commerce (SC from now on) will be explained, as well as its features, characteristics, and practical application and also theories on which SC relies on. Secondly, the research hypothesis will be presented. Thus, the research will go through the definitions of the constructs of the model, follow by the hypotheses and the justifications, with a graphical representation of the model. A paragraph for Methodology, Expected Contributions, Thesis Chapter Overview and Workplan will be depicted. Lastly, the Reference Section.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMING

In this section, the theoretical background of this study is presented. First, a definition of Web 2.0, SM and E-Commerce will be given. Secondly, the concept of SC will be explored and the concept of Electronic Word of Mouth. Lastly, Social Influence Theory and SS and Trust related theories in the online environment will be illustrated.

2.1 Web 2.0, Social Media, and E-Commerce

Businesses have been able to gain a lot by the quick development of Web 2.0 and SM. The fast development permitted enterprises to transform their strategy from a product-oriented to a customer centered one (Wingand et al., 2008). Fundamentally, SM denote the Internet Based applications which rely upon Web 2.0, whilst Web 2.0 is identify both as an idea and as a platform to take advantage of collective intelligence (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). In this circumstance, experiences and opinions are displayed by individuals, so that can be harnessed to make more informed purchase decisions (Dennison et al., 2009). Businesses online, thus, are capable to grasp customers' demeanor, that can be translated into shopping intentions.

All this information helps enterprises in successfully develop an effective business strategy. Without a doubt, these two actors hold reciprocal advantages, which is why, in the last few years, the world assisted to the conception of SC (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013).

There is evidence of the influence of Web 2.0 on e-commerce both in business outcomes and in social interaction within consumers. Precisely, an important increase in business transactions and reliability of business reputation systems have been experienced (Swamynathan et al., 2008), together with the intensification of business relationship with consumers, the boost of the traffic into company websites, business opportunities and possibility to brand development (Michaelidou et al., 2011). Moreover, Web 2.0 is meaningful for consumers because UCG exert influence in their preferences and decisions (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

In e-commerce, due to the presence of Web 2.0, the market power moved from companies to individuals (Stephen & Toubia, 2009). In addition, because consumers' desires are biased by the increasing needs for online services, they seek for additional ways to enhance engagement (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). Thus, as Constantinides & Fountain argue (2008), Web 2.0 supplies users with new approaches to interact with the market and the community at once.

2.2 Social Commerce

SC is a concept similar to e-commerce. As a matter of fact, in SC communities, individuals share their interest, passion and goals and this permits them to browse and have a glance to them, as well as adding items to the cart and to proceed with the online payment (Matsumoto, 2009). What differentiate SC to e-commerce is that in the former, the community has the possibility to share feedbacks about products or services and to contribute with information that can lead to a change in the decision making process of the individual (Ng, 2013).

Firms can gain great competitive advantage thanks to this process, known as Electronic Word Of Mouth (eWOM), which is a practice considerably used in marketing (Word Of Mouth Marketing Association, 2010). As a result, Dennison (2009), defined SC as the application of WOM to e-commerce.

Since SC involves multiple disciplines, including marketing, computer science, sociology and psychology, a multitude of definitions appeared in the literature (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). For the purpose of this study, the following definition from Liu et al. (2016) will be used: “ SC involves the application of SM to support social interaction, communication, and user-generated content for assisting consumers in online buying” (p. 307).

Within its advantages, SC sites help its consumers in the decision-making process. Therefore, the platforms should be designed in order to make the interaction among users easier (Ng, 2013). If the interaction is frequent, the level of interpersonal attractiveness of the platform increases as a consequence (Liao et al., 2010). Resulting from a literature review realized by Huang and Benyoucef (2013), two types of SC are recognized. One take place on platforms that have been originally developed for e-commerce (i.e. Amazon), which have been arranged with Web 2.0 features to facilitate consumers' interaction. On the other hand, the second type of platform is based on Social Network Sites (SNSs) with the addition of e-commerce features. While the latter present a high level of interaction among users, the former shows among its limitations, the little possibility of creating UCG (Hajli et al., 2017).

2.3 Electronic Word of Mouth

Since Web 2.0 emerges, UCG increases, thus, without any doubt, eWOM employ an extreme power for marketing activities. Scholars have largely recognized the strength of interpersonal influence (Arndt, 1967; Herr et al., 1991; King & Summers, 1970). In eWOM, users can review

products found in e-commerce and influence the purchase decisions of consumers (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Davis & Khazanchi, 2008; Duan et al., 2008). Research discovered that Word of Mouth (WOM from now on) is perceived by customers as more trustworthy than traditional advertising (Cheung & Thadani, 2012), thus, this influence was extended also to the online environments.

Even though WOM and eWOM present common features, they show some differences in several dimensions. Indeed, eWOM is characterized by scalability and speed in the disseminating process, while with traditional WOM, the information is shared in private conversations and just among a small group (Avery et al., 1999; Dellarocas, 2003; Li & Hitt, 2008; Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Moreover, the process is synchronic, while through eWOM, the information is spread, and it remain in the online environment for an unrestricted amount of time and available at any moment (Goldsmith, 2006; Hung & Li, 2007; Karakaya & Barnes, 2010). EWOM is also easier in measurement, due to the fact that the information is saved in an archive (Lee at al., 2008; Park & Kim, 2008). The volume, moreover, is larger in quantity if a comparison with the traditional one is made (Chatterjee, 2001). Lastly, and this implication has a strong importance for the purpose of the research, WOM is spread from a known sender, while in eWOM the communicator is unknown, thus the trustworthiness is limited. This limitation is lowered in community, as in SC environments.

It is possible to differentiate two different kinds of eWOM: one related to e-commerce (EC-eWOM) and the second eWOM in SM (SC-eWOM). SC-eWOM aims at affecting emotions, information acquisition process, social bonding and impression towards a product of the individual (Berger, 2014). The quality of eWOM vary depending on the different context in which it is applied. This depend on the fact that when an individual use an e-commerce site, just little information about the author are available (Cheung and Thadani, 2012), therefore, the information has a different impact. Besides, as far as online shopping is concerned, the credibility of eWOM plays a critical role due to the fact that the goods could not be touched physically by the customer (Fan et al., 2013). As explained previously, SM-eWOM is able to reduce the lack of credibility, and this is the reason why SC catches the attention of firms.

2.4 The Importance of Social Influence Online

The theory of Social Influence suggest that human beings remodel their behaviors due to the interaction within each other (Kelman,1995; Amblee & Bui, 2011). The literature proposed two

school of thoughts regards Social Influence Theory: the first proposed by Deutsch and Gerard (1955), the second by Kelman (1985).

The former investigates the influence within members of the same groups and identified two dissimilar branches of social influence: informational and normative. Information is defined as the inclination to accept information acquired from another as evidence about reality, thus the acknowledging of evidence, while normative as a tendency to conform to the positive expectancy of an individual, therefore “compliance” (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955).

In the latter school of thought, Kelman (1985), recognized three processes that cause the change in the behavior: compliance, identification, and internalization. Compliance takes place when, in order to feel part of the group, an individual accepts the influence from a peer. Identification occurs when the influence is accepted to preserve or obtain the relationship with the peer. Lastly, Internalization implies that the individual consent to influence because the habits is rewarding.

It has been studied that the three processes are connected to the social types discovered by Deutsch and Gerard (1955). In fact, informational social influence operates thanks to internalization, and normative social influence can either operates through compliance or identification (Bearden et al., 1989; Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975).

2.4.1 Information social influence in Social Commerce

In an on-line environment, social informational social influence come about when the user perceives the information provided by the community as evidence to be used for the decision-making process (Hu et al., 2019). A research showed that the level of trust of the consumer towards a brand increases if the information is received thanks to eWOM, rather than traditional advertising (Amblee & Bui, 2011; Benlian et al., 2012; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). When a consumer encounters difficulty when purchasing alone, the importance of informational social influence arose (Lee et al., 2011).

2.4.2 Normative social influence in Social Commerce

As mentioned before normative social influence is tendency to conform to the positive expectancy of an individual. This specific kind of influence is very close to the idea of “subjective norm”, denoting that the approval of people is important for the individual (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1977). This realized the need for psychological association in a social group of the individual, which is a strong element in SM (Lord et al., 2001; Kwahk & Kim, 2017). The willingness to comply with the other tastes, preferences, opinions shapes the users’ purchase behavior (Hu et al., 2019).

2.4.3 Antecedents of Social Influence: Social Support

In online environments, social influence come up due to the individual's cooperation with the platform. For this reason, the factors of social influence should be read with the attributes of SC. SS and relationship quality can be seen as fundamental elements behind SC (Liang et al., 2011). SS is identified as “an individual's experiences of being cared for, being responded to, and being helped by people in that individual's social group” (Liang et al., 2011 – p.70). Without any doubt, social influence occurs when there is a cooperation within two parties, and in SC, this happens thanks to SS, in particular when the exchange became frequent (Hu et al., 2019).

2.5 Trust related theories

The section aims to discuss theoretical implication of trust in the online environment.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) developed the Commitment-Trust Theory, which focus on the common effect in maintaining long-term relationship of relationship commitment and trust. This theory has been widely used in relationship marketing, and it basically states that commitment occurs when both parties are willing to put the maximum effort possible in order to preserve the relationship, while trust when “existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994 – p.23). The theory has been applied in different fields, such as buyer seller relationship (Doney & Cannon, 1997), interpersonal relationship (Costa, 2003) and relationships formed online (Li et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2010).

Another popular theory in the online environment is the Trust Transfer Theory (Lu et al., 2010; Lim et al., 2006) developed thanks to the Attribution Theory (Kelley, 1973) which affirm that a person makes attributions of an event based on his/her knowledge. Trust Transference Theory states that trust in a known person/entity can be transferred to an unknown person/entity thanks to the association between the other two (Lim et al., 2006; Shi et al., 2013).

Three distinct parties are involved in the trust transfer process: a Trustor, a Trustee and a trusted third party (Stewart, 2003). The course of action is developed as follow: trust is transmitted to the Trustee if the Trustor believe in the trustworthiness of the third party due to the close relationship between them (Burt & Knez, 1995). Studies proved that the trust transfer process can take place bot in online and offline environments.

3. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The theory of Social Influence suggest that human beings remodel their behaviors due to the interaction within each other (Kelman, 1895; Amblee & Bui, 2011). Therefore, for marketers is very important to understand how behaviors such as purchase intention and sharing intention are affected by the introduction of features that allows social exchange of information when using SC. Behavioral intentions are defined in the literature as the likelihood of an individual of being engaged in a certain behavior, which means that understand a specific behavioral intention help in forecasting of the actual behavior during the individual’s decision making process (Fishbein et al., 1980)

This section aims to explore the main construct behind the study. When analyzing the topics, hypotheses will be presented and defined.

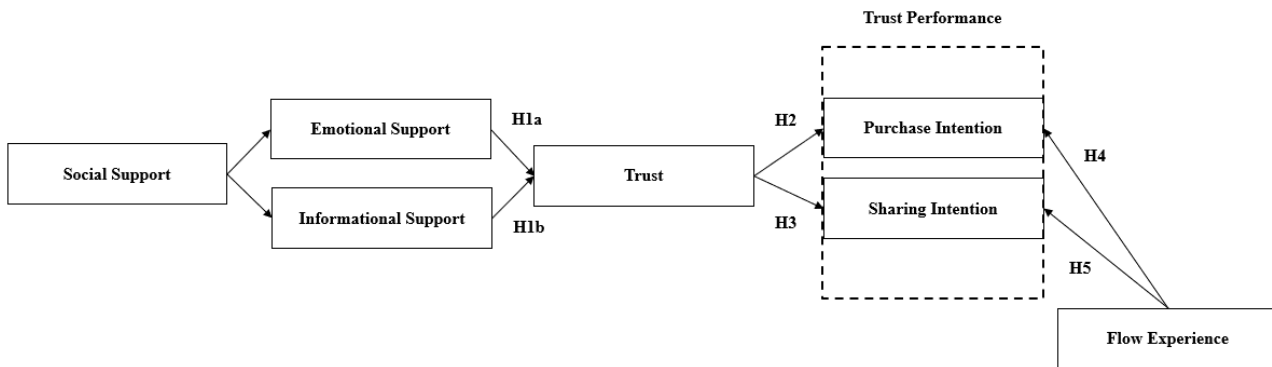


Figure 1 - Proposed Research Model

3.1 Trust

The literature support the fact that trust plays a fundamental role in the online environment (Mutz, 2005; Gefen et al., 2003; Pavlou, 2003, Wu et al., 2010), especially when it comes to “transaction costs”, which are those costs related to the valuation whether a system is reliable or not (Mutz, 2005). Because of that, it is strongly believed that establishing trust will enhance economic growth. Social trust may vary within people: studies shows that an individual is more willing to perform an online transaction when the level of trust is higher (Mutz, 2005). Scholars judge social trust as a key factor of a country’s economic prosperity, since it can benefit from the e-transactions (Mutz, 2005).

The importance of the role of trust increases when the perceived level of risk is higher, as in an online environment, since the product cannot be checked physically (Mutz, 2005). Another relevant

factor in e-commerce, and thus SC, regards disclosing private information and credit card details, which is a huge concern for individuals (Smith et al., 2011). As a matter of fact, new ICT functionalities have been developed by firms with the aim of increasing the trust perception towards the e-shopping platform.

3.2 Social Support

Cobb (1976) defined SS as a piece of information that lead an individual to believed that he is cared for and loved. If an individual shows strong SS, it is more inclined to build a strong relationship with the member of a certain community (Liang et al., 2013). SS is frequently considered as a multi-dimensional element. House (1981) argued that there are four types of SS which are emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. For the purpose of this study, the research will focus just on emotional and informational support, which are more relevant when it comes to SC.

Due to the fact that in an online environment, users are intangible, SS is defined as “the exchange of verbal as well as nonverbal messages in order to communicate emotional and informational messages that reduce the retriever's stress” (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2009). In view of the boots of the Internet usage in the past decade, an expanding amount of people use SM to communicate and stay connected. In accordance with this, the natural outcome is the transformation of social supportive communication from an offline environment to an online (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2009; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005; Goswami et al., 2010). Usually, Online SS is indicated as an exchange of information and emotional interaction within the internet and therefore, informational support and emotional support are regarded as two major approaches for providing online supports (Coulson, 2005; Welbourne et al., 2009). Chen & Shen (2015) argued that informational and emotional support facilitate SC experience.

3.2.1 Emotional Support

Emotional support is the feeling that makes the individual feel valuable. It is often related to empathy, being cared of, loved, encouraged. It is the element within SS which help users to share and look for help inside the community (Ommen et al., 2008). Moreover, if users feel that they dispose care from the community, especially in the case there are people who experience similar issues, they show more willingness to stay part of it. Research verify that trust is related with caring (Ommen et al., 2008), thus, thanks to the emotional exchange and connection that is created within the members of the community, trust is developed. Based on the discussion it is hypothesized:

H1a: Emotional Support has a positive impact on Trust in Social Commerce Websites.

3.2.2 Informational support

Informational support occurs when individuals dispose with advice, guidance, or useful information in the decision making (Liang et al., 2008). The fact that people can without difficulties obtain information that support them when dealing with problem, i.e. help from the community present as a consequence that they will trust more the group and to provide new information (Porter & Donthu, 2008). This benefit is reflected to the increase in the willingness to recognize the potential of the online community and to hope to maintain a long-term relationship with it. Moreover, they will feel a sense of trust toward those who provide information (Ommen et al., 2008).

According to the discussion it is hypothesized:

H1b: Informational Support has a positive impact on Trust in Social Commerce Websites.

3.3 Trust Performance

3.3.1 Purchase Intention

Research confirmed that trust strongly affects customer's buying intention (Shin 2010, Han & Windsor, 2011, Lu et al., 2010). With the birth of Web 2.0 and its applications, customers can consult ratings, review and overcome the problem of trustworthiness.

Trust have been largely analyzed by the literature e.g. trust in websites, products, sellers' and buyers' (Teo & Liu, 2007). Presently, there is no a specific theory that explains individuals behaviors in relation to trust and trust performance, however, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), developed by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), can be utilized due to the fact that trust connotes individuals' beliefs and confidence, and as a consequence it can be seen as an antecedents of individual behavior (Teo & Liu, 2007). The TRA gives a framework that illustrate the relation between attitudes, intentions, and behaviors. Moreover, TRA has been used for investigating both consequences of trust and relationship with trust and trust outcomes (Pavlou & Gefen, 2004; Teo & Liu, 2007), for example, Kuan and Book (2007) proved that a higher customer trust leads to higher purchase intention, especially online. Consequently:

H2: Trust has a positive impact on Purchasing Intention in Social Commerce Websites.

3.3.2 Sharing Intention

One of the central elements of SM, is the interaction among users. Considering Web 2.0, the major purpose of this media is to help users staying connected (Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007). Thanks to this characteristic, individuals are free to send, receive and process content within the community. It has been studied that a high level of commitment in the community is positively related to sharing intention. With the boots of information on internet, consumers tried to look for information that came from people close to them or to any individual in whom they can trust.

Moreover, they will be more willing to share opinion and personal details and experience due to privacy issue. Thus:

H3: Trust has a positive impact on Sharing Intention in Social Commerce Websites.

3.4 Flow Experience

When the individual experiences a mental state where nothing else matter, when he is fully concentrated, it means that he/her is having the so-called Flow Experience (Gao & Bai, 2014). Precisely, in SC, flow refers to a momentane experience in which the user is fully involved in SC activity (Gao & Bai, 2014).

Flow has been recognized by the literature as an important element in consumption experiences (Chang, 2013; Faiola et al., 2013). The strengthening of flow experience is fundamental for SC (Zhang et al., 2014). In on-line context, community's interaction creates a feeling of immersion and induces a state of flow for individuals (Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Teng et al., 2012), the time passed fast and the feeling is characterized by a perception of unawareness of what is surrounding the user. Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi (1988) defined flow as a feeling of completely absorption in the task.

Individual my reach a level of amusement from flow experience. As a matter of fact, research discovered that flow strongly affected the behavior of users in context such as augmented reality (Huang & Liao, 2017; Rauschnabel et al., 2017), online games (Su et al., 2016; Liu, 2017) and SM (Kaur et al., 2016; Pelet et al.,2017) and SC (Zhou, 2019). As a matter of fact, when using SC community, the user feels great enjoyment, thus flow, which facilitate purchase and sharing intention (Zhou, 2019). Conversely, Fouladi & Navimipour (2017) proved that the consumer may feel that the SC company cannot offer quality product or services, if he/her have not experienced flow while using the platform, thus it will decrease the purchase intention. Moreover, Social Exchange Theory

(Emerson, 1976), that states that an individual is less willing to maintain a relationship if the cost is higher than the reward, supports the fact that flow experience is positively correlated to sharing intention. As a matter of fact, consumer may feel that the sharing is not worth it if the platform is not able to provide a flow experience (Yan et al., 2016).

According to this discussion, it is hypothesized:

H4: Flow Experience has a positive impact on Purchase Intention in Social Commerce Websites.

H5: Flow Experience has a positive impact on Sharing Intention in Social Commerce Websites.

3.5 Literature Review table

Table 1

	REFERENCE	CONTENT
1	Ng, C. S. P. (2013). Intention to purchase on social commerce websites across cultures: A cross-regional study. <i>Information & Management</i> , 50(8), 609-620	The study aims understanding which is the role of culture and trust in social network environment. The theories applied are: Trust transference theory, social interactions, and Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The findings support (a) the hypothesis that culture has a moderating effect in SM; (b) that trust, which can be attributed to closeness and familiarity within members, is a moderator in online environments.
2	Liang, T. P., & Turban, E. (2011). Introduction to the special issue social commerce: a research framework for social commerce. <i>International Journal of Electronic Commerce</i> , 16(2), 5-14.	The purpose of this study is to identify the scope of SC and some possible issues for practitioners when developing a platform. To do so, a framework that integrates six elements was developed. These elements are research theme, SM, commercial activities, underlying theories, outcomes, and research methods.
3	Liu, H., Chu, H., Huang, Q., & Chen, X. (2016). Enhancing the flow experience of consumers in China through interpersonal interaction in social commerce. <i>Computers in Human Behavior</i> , 58, 306-314.	The research uses the S-O-R framework to study which interpersonal interaction factors cause the enhancement of flow experience, which directly affects consumers in purchasing on-line.
4	Huang, Z., & Benyoucef, M. (2013). From e-commerce to social commerce: A close look at design features. <i>Electronic Commerce Research and Applications</i> , 12(4), 246-259	The study is dedicated to the understanding and clarification of the concept of SC, with a focus on the design features, which the literature lacks on,

		proposing a model. The new model has been tested in Amazon and Starbucks on Facebook.
5	Baghdadi, Y. (2016). A framework for social commerce design. <i>Information Systems</i> , 60, 95-113.	Due to the fact that there is a lack in the understanding of how to allow transaction directly in the SC platform, the study aims helping practitioners through the development of a framework that incorporates both IT features and business perspective.
6	Liang, T. P., Ho, Y. T., Li, Y. W., & Turban, E. (2011). What drives social commerce: The role of social support and relationship quality. <i>International Journal of Electronic Commerce</i> , 16(2), 69-90.	Empirical study conducted in a microblog with the aim of understanding user's social sharing and social shopping intention. The elements under investigation are social support and relationship quality: the results indicate that both play a critical role. Social support and Web site quality positively influence the willingness of users to keep using SNSs.
7	Li, C. Y. (2019). How social commerce constructs influence customers' social shopping intention? An empirical study of a social commerce website. <i>Technological Forecasting and Social Change</i> , 144, 282-294.	Applying and S-O-R framework, the study discovered that (a) SC features have a positive impact in cognitive and effective states; (b) there is not a strong correlation with an increase in users' intention to purchase; (c) SS is positively correlated to intention to trust in product recommendation; (d) purchase intention are affected by trust, while informational support not. The results proved that SC helps (a) user in making more rational purchase decision; (b) brands with advertising strategies.
8	Yahia, I. B., Al-Neama, N., & Kerbache, L. (2018). Investigating the drivers for social commerce in social media platforms:	The research investigates the drivers of SC in SM platforms using UTAUT 2 as a model to understand the influence on trust in the platform perceived

	Importance of trust, social support and the platform perceived usage. <i>Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services</i> , 41, 11-19.	usage. The findings suggested that the elements that exert the stronger influence on trust are reputation and price advantage, even though the effect can be reduced by habits. A surprising result of the study is that social interaction with the vendor reduce trust as well as product differentiation.
9	Molinillo, S., Anaya-Sánchez, R., & Liebana-Cabanillas, F. (2020). Analyzing the effect of social support and community factors on customer engagement and its impact on loyalty behaviors toward social commerce websites. <i>Computers in Human Behavior</i> , 108, 105980.	The study examines the reasons why consumer engage in social commerce and the consequent practical implications for firms. The model applied aims to (a) tests the different effects on customer engagement between the influence of social support and three community factors which are community drivenness, identification and trust; (b) the impact of customer engagement on four customer loyalty dimensions: one of them transactional (repurchase intention) and three non-transactional (willingness to co-create, stickiness intention, and positive eWOM intention).
10	Hu, X., Chen, X., & Davison, R. M. (2019). Social support, source credibility, social influence, and impulsive purchase behavior in social commerce. <i>International Journal of Electronic Commerce</i> , 23(3), 297-327.	The study investigates impulsive purchase behavior in SC with a focus on the influence of peers in the process. The findings suggest that the credibility and trustworthiness, helped by social and informational support, are related to social influence which boots purchases.

4. METHODOLOGY

The following chapter illustrate the research method that will be applied for the purpose of this study. It will first explain the research design and the procedure that has been used to develop the research, then it will describe the target sample selected. Lastly the data collection procedures and the analysis procedures.

4.1 Research design

The methodology selected to perform this research is the quantitative approach. Usually, a qualitative study is performed with exploratory aims, therefore it is not very suitable for this specific matter. Besides, the topic has been explored widely by many researcher in the last years for what concerns: (a) business applications and business strategies (Serrano and Torres, 2010; Costa and Tavares, 2011); (b) its psychological impact (Michaelidou et al., 2011); (c) together with the impact on users' behavioral beliefs (Grange and Benbasat, 2010). Given the circumstances, the quantitative approach better matches the purpose of the research which is measure the impact of some constructs in individuals' behavior.

4.2 Sample description

The target group that has been selected for the research is Europeans with good experience and knowledge of e-commerce and SM: thus, the study is looking for any individual who has an account in any SM or e-commerce websites (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest etc.). The heterogeneity of the European population increases the validity of the results. The participants' age can vary, there is not any age limits, so that the study can better reflect the current situation.

4.3 Data collection

A self-administrated survey will be spread online to conduct a quantitative analysis and test the hypotheses. The survey has been chosen because it is a way that helps in predicting behavior such as purchase intention, sharing intention and to understand the relation connecting the construct and variables of the research model (Newsted et al., 1998). Furthermore, questionnaires have been frequently used in SC, in particular when it comes to behavior intentions (Huang & Benyoucef, 2014; Zhang et al., 2014). It will be disseminated online to maintain a congruency with the data and the topic under investigation. Besides, there are several advantages in using an online questionnaire such as that it easily reaches people and that can measure more precisely social variables. Especially in

this historical period, strongly hit by the pandemic of Sars-Cov-2, this method is believed to be the best choice for the purpose of the study.

The questionnaire will be designed and diffused with the software SphinxDeclic.

The content of the survey will be created in English and Italian to facilitate the respondents to answer, and to be sure that there is no misinterpretation of the questions. The translation will be performed by native speakers.

Before answering the questionnaire, the respondent will be undergoing a prototype of SC platform. The interface is going to look like Instagram but with the additional features that characterized social commerce websites. Instagram was chosen as a basis for the design of the prototype on the grounds that nowadays it is one of the most popular SM platforms, and therefore participants will be more familiar with the already existing features. Thus, they can spend more time discovering the one related to social commerce. The first page of the interface will present on the top a set of “Stories”, as in the original platform and the option for sending direct messages. In the “Stories” section all the functionalities of Instagram will be available, such as polls, questions, swipe up, filters etc. A major part of the screen will be dedicated to peoples’ and firms’ content, such as pictures from firms regards products, from people, advertising etc. At the bottom there will be the classic options for the navigations like the feed, the personal profile, the option to add the UGC, the place where to check the participants’ own interactions and the searching environment. When clicking to the searching environment, the second page of the prototype will be displayed. On the top there will be the search bar and the QR Code Scan. Close to it, there will be a section for the shop. There, some items will be shown. When selecting one that catches participant’s interest a new page will be generated, with all the information about product’s features, the brand, shipping time etc. The innovative part consists of the presence of comments and opinions from the community, that should help the user in making a more pondered shopping decision. In addition, there will room for finalize the purchase process directly from the platform.

The questionnaire will be divided in five section with the aim of investigating and measuring the construct attributed to the research model:

- a. SS elements
 - a.1 Informational Support
 - a.2 Emotional Support

- b. Trust towards the community
- c. Participants' response towards flow state
- d. Respondents' purchase intention and sharing intention
- e. Respondents' profile.

The items of the questionnaire will be adapted from past studies and will be measure on a five-point Likert-scale, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree”.

The scale will be as follow:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree.

The items are listed below:

Table 2

CONSTRUCT	#	ITEM	REFERENCE
FLOW EXPERIENCE	1	It is fun to interact on this website.	Zhang et al, 2014
	2	The interaction on this website is interesting	
	3	When shopping on this website, I feel the excitement of exploring.	
	4	I am absorbed when shopping on this website.	
SOCIAL SUPPORT (Emotional)	1	When faced with difficulties, some people on this social commerce are on my side with me.	Liang et al., 2012
	2	When faced with difficulties, some people on this social commerce comforted and encouraged me	
	3	When faced with difficulties, some people on this social commerce listened to me talk about my private feelings	
	4	When faced with difficulties, some people on this social commerce expressed interest and concern in my well-being	
SOCIAL SUPPORT (Informational)	1	When I encounter a problem, some people on this social commerce site give me information to help overcome the problem	
	2	On this social commerce site, some people offer suggestions when I need help.	
	3	When I am faced with difficulty, some people on this social commerce site help me discover the cause and offer suggestions	
TRUST	1	Members in Douban will always try and help me out if I get into	Chang & Chuang, 2011; Chow & Chan, 2008

		difficulties.	
	2	Members in Douban will always keep the promises they make to one another.	
	3	Members in Douban are truthful in dealing with one another.	
	4	Plurk is a reliable social networking site.	Liang et al., 2011
	5	Plurk can be counted on as a good social networking site.	
	6	The performances of Plurk always meets my expectations	
	7	This s-commerce firm is trustworthy	Kim & Park, 2012
	8	I trust that this s-commerce firm keeps my best interests in mind.	
	9	This s-commerce firm will keep its promises	
	10	I believe in the information that this s-commerce firm provides.	
	11	This s-commerce firm wants to be known as a company that keeps its promises and commitments	
SHARING INTENTION	1	I will encourage friends or others to shop on this social commerce site.	Yang et al., 2015
	2	I will recommend this social commerce site to someone who seeks my advice	
	3	I will say positive things about this social commerce site to other people	
	4	I will recommend this social commerce site to someone else.	

	5	I am willing to provide my experiences and suggestions when other members on the social commerce site want my advice on buying something	Liang et al., 2011
	6	I am willing to share my own shopping experience with other members on the social commerce site	
	7	I am willing to recommend a product that is worth buying to other members on the social commerce site	
	8	I will ask my friends on the social commerce site to provide me with their suggestions before I go shopping	
PURCHASE INTENTION	1	I predict that I will purchase products on this website.	Pavlou & Fygenson, 2006
	2	It is highly likely that I will purchase products on this website	
	3	Whenever I need to shop, I intend to purchase products on this website.	
	4	Whenever I need to shop, I plan to purchase products on this website.	
	5	I am willing to buy the products on this social commerce site.	Hsiao et al., 2010
	6	I am likely to buy the products on this social commerce site.	
	7	I think that this website provides a good opportunity to shop. I would consider buying the products on this social commerce site.	

4.4 Data analysis procedure

Before proceeding with the spread of the questionnaire, it will be tested through a pilot in order to recognize the possible vulnerabilities, evaluate the length, and the understandability. It will be improved after, according to the results. After this phase, the survey will be spread: this process will mainly be done through SM channels (Instagram, What's App, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter). A snowball sampling method will be used: it consists of disseminating an online link that let people have access to the survey and to distribute it whenever its terminated.

The questionnaire will be completely anonymous, and it will require a short amount of time.

In order to involve participants, the purpose of the research will be shortly explained, and the prototype will be presented.

The Structuring Equation Model, using Partial Least Squares (PLS) estimations, will be used to test the measurement and structural model. This technique has been chosen because to estimate the measurement and structural model concurrently, it merges the principal components analysis (CFA) and the regression (Hair et al., 1998). The software employed will be Smart-PLS 2.0, which is good option to deal with formative measures and moderating relationship (Barnes, 2011).

5. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

This research will contribute to the scholarly discussion on the topic when investigates intention to purchase and sharing intentions. Over the years, since its birth, the concept of SC was vague from what could be understood from the literature. For example, SC and Social Shopping have been used as synonymous in some of the literature (Tedeschi, 2006). Although, Beisel (2006), distinguished the two concepts. He defined the former as an environment where people jointly work, communicate, seek for information, with the aim of making more informed purchase decisions. The latter, on the other hand, is defined as a subcategory of SC, rather, the action of sharing knowledge about previous purchases. Thus, the study aims at uncovering possible misinterpretation of the literature regards the topic.

Understanding the reasons that lead consumers to engage in activities related to both constructs, contributes to the literature on SC (Chen & Shen, 2015). Also, this study contributes to theory claiming for empirical investigation on variables that influence consumer trust in SC, under the lens of the Trust Transfer Theory (Kim & Park, 2013). Increasing trust in social networks is expected to enhance the purchase intention in SC (Ng, 2013). This research aims to corroborate the findings that trust is an essential aspect of e-commerce and SC. The research model proposed here places trust as a central element, meeting the research gaps and contributing to the social commerce literature (Hajli, 2012). The model proposed for this study is unique in that it provides new insights into the factors that influence trust in social commerce.

Additionally, this study will investigate the social characteristics of individuals and its influences, aspects leading people to rely more or less on SC. The users' experience on the SC platform also plays an important role in the process of establishing trust with the platform service (Bennett & Gabriel, 2001; Walczuch et al., 2001). Also, some of the inconsistent findings in SC literature may be due to cultural differences (Keil et al., 2000). Finally, SS is analyzed. The members of the social network aim to feel closer to one another, consequently sharing more information. Users seek to interact with their friends and acquaintances safely and conveniently. Without this favorable condition, continuous content sharing would decrease (Liang et al., 2012).

Literature reinforces that is important that businesses adapt their business model to SC (Lorenzo et al., 2007; Liang & Turban, 2011). The impact of SM (and its features) can be seen in business results, with increased levels of interaction between consumers. This research will contribute to identifying factors related to trust between consumers and SC platforms. It can help businesses to develop new functionalities that increase social interactions, maximizing users' access to products

offered on the platform (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). Trust is also relevant for practitioners because, in SC, trust directly impacts content sharing. Previous studies on trust have demonstrated its effects on users' intentions to share content related to products and services (Kim & Park, 2013). Measure trust levels on SC platforms, mapping also content sharing, can be an effective tool for business strategists.

This research opens up future avenues for businesses to test new ideas associated with the constructs studied here. Understanding the motivators for sharing content in social commerce can help managers to set up new interactions for their users' (generating data and knowledge about their behaviors) and use it in favor of promoting their business model. Companies can incorporate and apply the knowledge that will be acquired here, to develop and incorporate new SM features – searching for a more engaging and reliable experience. Finally, consumers tend to consult their online community for advice that will influence their purchasing decisions (Liang et al., 2012). The findings of this research will indicate to SM and SC entrepreneurs that the focus can't be only on offering good services and features, but also stimulating community behavior – with a good relationship between users – improving their intention to share and purchase.

6. THESIS CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Abstract

List of Abbreviations

List of Figures

List of Tables

1. Introduction

2. Theoretical framing

2.1 Web 2.0, Social Media, and E-Commerce

2.2 Social Commerce

2.3 Electronic Word of Mouth

2.4 The Importance of Social Influence Online

2.4.1 Information social influence in social commerce

2.4.2 Normative social influence in social commerce

2.4.3 Antecedents of Social Influence: Social Support

2.5 Trust related theories

3. Research Hypotheses

3.1 Trust

3.2 Social Support

3.2.1 Emotional Support

3.2.2 Informational Support

3.3 Trust Performance

3.3.1 Purchase Intention

3.3.2 Sharing Intention

3.4 Flow Experience

3.5 Literature Review Table

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

4.2 Sample description

4.3 Data collection

4.4 Data Analysis Procedure

5. Data analysis

6. Research Findings

9. Discussion & Limitations

Bibliography

Appendix

7. WORKPLAN

Table 3

Time Period	Activity	Stage
1 st Sept. 2020 – 29 th Sept. 2020	Research and writing the Exposé	On progress
30 th September 2020	Exposé submission	/
1 st Oct. 2020 – 20 th Oct. 2020	Questionnaire Design	/
21 st Oct. 2020 – 31 st Oct. 2020	Questionnaire testing and Improvements	/
1 st Nov. 2020 – 15 th Nov. 2020	Data Collection	/
16 th Nov. 2020 – 10 th Dec. 2020	Data Analysis	/
11 th Dec. 2020 – 12 th Jan. 2020	Writing and Reviewing the Thesis	/
13 th January 2020	Thesis submission	/
19 th Jan. 2020 / 20 th Jan. 2020	Thesis defense	/

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