# Social Commerce and Consumer Decision Making:

## A Conceptual Model from Social Support Perspective

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*Abstract* - The emergence of social commerce made a paradigm shift in the business-consumer relationship realm. In fact, more power has shifted from the seller to the buyer and predominately fueled to strengthen e-commerce acceptance. Thus, understanding consumer behavior in the context of social commerce adoption has become inevitable for organizations that aim to convince consumers by particularly exploiting the advantage of social relationships and support. Moreover, such social ties will be able to facilitate trust as the most promising benefit while alleviating the perceived risk, which were the major concerns with online commerce over the years. This paper presents a framework to comprehend the impact of social commerce on the consumer decision making process stages; need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision and post purchase behavior with special reference to the social support perspective. In this context, pertaining literature in the field of social commerce; (1) lacks adequate explanatory model or (2) lacks substantial theoretical foundation or (3) consist practically complex models with inadequate empirical evidence. The research model employs the Social Commerce Constructs (SCC): recommendations and referrals, forums and communities, and ratings and reviews to examine the respective influence towards the consumer decision making process stages. Therefore, this paper intends to comprehend the impact of social commerce towards an integrative model incorporating all the consumer decision steps anticipating new knowledge. Further, this conceptual model is suggested to be empirically tested to validate the practical implications.

*Keywords:* Consumer Decision Making Process, Online Social Networks, Social Commerce, Social Commerce Constructs, Social Support

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# I.    Introduction

It is evident that the Web 2.0, predominantly including social media sites has a major impact on our online behavior. In fact, from a commercial point of view, it has extended its impact on offline and online purchasing decisions of consumers (e.g., Wang & Yu, 2015; Hajli N., 2015; Kwahk & Ge, 2012; Stephen & Galak, 2012; Han & Windsor, 2011; Forman et al, 2008). Hence, as a result social commerce and allied social media marketing has emerged and has trended. Subsequently, social media led to strengthening e-commerce adoption by building the trust and minimizing the perceived risk, which were strongly driven by the online community social support. Social Commerce uses Web 2.0 social technologies and infrastructure to facilitate interactions and user contributions in an online context to support consumers' acquisition of products and services (Liang & Turban, 2011). Importantly, social media environments facilitate consumers not only to buy the products and services, but also to co-create content that adds value to both the consumer and seller (Do-Hyung et al., 2007). Hence, consumers are becoming active content creators in the Internet in contrast to the preceding traditional passive behavior (Hajli M., 2012). Social Media is no longer a niche media as people have widely adopted social media and are using them to a greater extent. Hence, the applicability of social commerce may not be fragmented to any demographic and geographical profile. In fact, social commerce can be accepted as a global phenomenon. Consequently, organizations and marketers should not be skeptical on harnessing the benefits of social commerce.

Thus, social commerce is no longer a new phenomenon and it is considered to be the salient driving force of the business in near future. Besides, consumer decisions will significantly rely on and are inevitably prone to social commerce, which is strongly backed by the online social

support. Nevertheless, there is a dearth in research conducted to investigate the impact of Social Commerce Constructs (SCC) facilitated Online Social Networks (OSN) on consumer decision making process stages; need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision and post purchase behavior. This paper presents a framework to comprehend the impact of social commerce on the consumer decision making process stages with special reference to the social support perspective as pertaining literature in the field of social commerce: (1) lacks an adequate explanatory model (e.g., Wang & Yu, 2015) or (2) lacks substantial theoretical foundation (e.g., Osei & Abenyin, 2016; Hajli N., 2013; Rad & Benyoucef, 2011; Liang & Turban, 2011) or (3) presented practically complex models with inadequate empirical evidence (e.g., Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016; Yadav et al., 2013). The proposed research model employs the SCCs: recommendations and referrals, forums and communities, and ratings and reviews to examine the respective influence towards the consumer decision making process stages. Zhang and Benyoucef (2016) affirmed that there exists a theoretical and an empirical gap in investigating the above mentioned phenomenon as available literature mostly attempted to assess the impact of social commerce on individual stages or few stages at a time instead of comprehending the holistic consumer decision making process stages. Furthermore, intended empirical outcomes of this study will enable organizations to devise appropriate social commerce strategies for their brands that will reap the benefits at each stage in the decision making process. Consequently, in near future, social commerce could be optimized as an extended e-commerce model.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Second section discusses theoretical foundations on social commerce, online social support and consumer decision making process stages to build research propositions of the model; followed by the resulting conceptual model in the third section. Finally, fourth section discusses intended implications and concludes the paper.

## II. Theoretical Foundations and Propositions

### A. Social Commerce

Generally, OSNs (which are commonly grouped under the umbrella term "Social Media" or "Web 2.0") are web-based services that allow a person to create a profile in a given system and enable to build connections with other users in the same system, allowing to view and navigate among themselves (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Importantly, such OSNs allow communities of people to gather online, share information, knowledge, and opinions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). OSNs, including Facebook, are widely accepted and adopted by the worldwide Internet users. Approximately, 2 billion Internet users are using OSNs and these numbers are expected to grow continuously as a result of increasing usage of smart mobile devices and widely spreading Internet accessibility (Statista, 2016). Moreover, social media usage accounts for the highest proportion of the Internet consumption behavior. For instance, globally, average time spent on Facebook per visit is approximately 18 minutes (Statistic Brain, 2016).

Social Commerce uses Web 2.0 social technologies and infrastructure to facilitate interactions and user contributions in an online context to support consumers' acquisition of products and services (Liang & Turban, 2011). It is evident that these OSNs (especially including Facebook revolutionizing the business, commerce and marketing landscape) allow the consumer to be more informative and interactive (see; Song & Yoo, 2016; Wang & Yu, 2015) in contrast to traditional business, commerce and marketing. In fact, such OSN channels including Facebook placed the consumers in a more active role as market players and enabled them to reach (and be reached by) everyone, anywhere and anytime (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2010). Now, any business tends to strongly admit that social media is an inevitable aspect of their marketing management strategy despite their scale of business. Hence, it is recommended to build the business presence in social media platforms (Osei & Abenyin, 2016; Heinrichs et al., 2011).

### B. Social Commerce and Social Support

For an organization, it is important to have a business model adapted to social commerce, as the next generation of online business attracts new consumers predominantly supported by communities (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Similarly, the user's experience in the online context is fairly different to the offline environment as social influence has got broadened with the use of the social media in contrast to the past where social influence was limited to a small social circle. Theoretically, social support is how an individual's experience about being cared for, being responded to and being helped by people as a member of a social group (Cobb, 1976; Ali, 2011). Literature affirms that the presence of the social support both in offline and online contexts has a significant impact on the consumer behavior. Li (2008) asserted that user behavior is affected not only by their own motivations but also by motivations of other users in the consumer's OSN. Therefore, theories related to social interaction and social support will be relevant in understanding consumer behavior in social commerce research (Liang & Turban, 2011).

Social Commerce is accepted as a subset of e-commerce that combines commercial and social activities (i.e. social interactions and user generated content) via a Web 2.0 environment (Liang & Turban, 2011). Social technologies allow users to have social relationships with family, friends, peers, members of the other communities and e-vendors. In fact, OSNs allow users to access and observe decisions as well as opinions related to products and services of not only close friends, family, and colleagues, but also other people around the world (Wang & Yu, 2015; Pan et al., 2007). Hajli N. (2015) posited that members of such OSNs can communicate and share their consumption related experience by means of SCCs (i.e. rating and reviewing, recommending and referral, and forums and communities). They are supporting each other both in an informational and emotional context (Liang et al., 2011; Hajli N., 2013). SCCs have a significant impact on the emotional and informational support (Mohana et al., 2016). Social relationship is the key feature that differentiates social commerce from traditional commerce and other forms of online commercial activities. Consequently, social support is the key determinant of consumers' social commerce intention as well as success of social commerce

(Liang et al., 2011; Rad & Benyoucef, 2011; Zhang et al., 2014; Wang & Yu, 2015).

SCCs are Web 2.0 social features that empower consumers to generate content and share their experience (Hajli N., 2015). Members of online communities engage in different group activities and support each other through the social interactions and communications, which in turn are influential in shaping the consumer behavior (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). SCCs namely; rating and reviews, recommendations and referrals, and forums and communities are the key enablers of social support in OSNs (Hajli N., 2013). Further, Hajli et al., (2014) stressed that such SCCs are resulted by conceptualizing the eWOM (electronic word of mouth), which is also known as User Generated Content (UGC) in social commerce. SCCs in OSNs allow users to witness the perceptions and reactions of the community members towards products and services by the means of UGC. Nature of SCCs may be either in the form of favorable or unfavorable for a product or service based on consumers experience and the level of satisfaction. Consequently, SCCs provide content that might attract and retain consumers or disrupt and switch consumers of products or services. Ratings allow consumers to vote on products and services. Indeed, ratings tend to attract more interaction as less effort is needed from consumer. Reviews allow consumers to give feedback about products and services. However, reviews are longer and consumers can describe their experience. Recommendations and Referrals are personalized product or service endorsements that originate from the recipient's social graph. However, ratings and reviews are visible to everyone who wishes to see them. Forums and Communities allow consumers to join in group discussions and share information in a dedicated community group or a forum within the OSN. Importantly, availability and the features of these SCCs are platform (i.e. online social network platform) specific.

Importantly, the social support facilitated in social commerce led to enhance the trust and minimize the perceived risk, eventually increasing the buying intention of the consumer (Hajli N., 2015; Han & Windsor, 2011). In fact, trust is the most challenging concern of e-commerce for consumers, which can be addressed by social commerce. Consumers search for product, service and

company information in OSNs since they find such sources contain UGC that are more reliable and relevant than information provided by the marketers (Fotis et al., 2012; Bernoff & Li, 2008) and traditional media (Goh et al., 2013). Further, SCCs provides seller's inducement to be trustworthy (Hajli N., 2013). Moreover, people tend to consider and follow others' heuristic information (i.e. choices, opinions and etc.) to simplify the cognitive effort in decision making and overcoming the information overload (Bonabeau, 2004; Simpson et al., 2008), which could be facilitated by OSNs to a greater extent. Consumers do not have an experience regarding physically observing (i.e. touching, smelling, etc.) a product in online shopping. However, comments, reviews and ratings provided by other consumers are able to mitigate such limitations and thus influence the consumer behavior (Do-Hyung et al., 2007; Akar & Topçu, 2011). Apparently, consumers are more interested in other people's recommendations than the vendor generated information (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Consequently, Senecal and Nantel (2004) asserted that consumers are strongly influenced by the online recommendations for their online product choices. Hence, consumers could rely on such online recommendations especially when they cannot experience the products or services in online context. In addition, consumers' purchasing intention increases along with the quality of the reviews and the number of the online reviews (Do-Hyung et al., 2007). In fact, third party reviews have a significant impact on consumer purchasing decisions (Yubo & Jinhong, 2005). Further, an increase in the total number of ratings on a product or service will have a positive influence towards the consumer purchasing decisions (Cheung et al., 2014). They also stressed that prior purchase information provided by other consumers on an ONS can provide a reference basis to subsequent purchasing decisions of same consumer as well as later potential consumers' decisions.

## C. Social Commerce and Consumer Decision Making

The concept of consumer behavior attempts to understand the consumer decision making process, which has multiple stages, including the predominant act of buying products and services. Depending on the different factors and findings,

numerous researchers and academics have developed and revised consumer decision making process models over the past years. There were slightly different consensus about the stages involved in consumer decision making process model among the scholars (e.g., Nicosia, 1966; Engel, Kollat, & Blackwell, 1968; Rice, 1993; Tyagi & Kumar, 2004; Foxall, 2005). However, the five stages model that explains five prominent activities in consumer's decision making process: need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post purchase behavior is considered as the commonly accepted model of consumer decision making process (e.g., Kotler & Armstrong, 2016; Kotler & Keller, 2016; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2015). Conceptually, it is accepted that marketers need to focus on all the stages in consumer decision making process rather than relying on the purchase decision stage only. Although each stage represents a decisive step in the decision making process, all the consumers do not follow them in a sequential order (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016; Osei & Abenyin, 2016; Rad & Benyoucef, 2011). In fact, consumers pass through all five stages with every purchase but in more routine purchases, consumers often skip or reverse some of these stages (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016).

Analyzing the consumer behavior has been an interesting research phenomenon both in the context of traditional and online marketplaces. Social Media can positively as well as negatively influence the rationality and effectiveness of consumer decision making (Wang & Yu, 2015; Rad & Benyoucef, 2011; Power & Phillips-Wren, 2011). Moreover, consumers tend to weigh negative eWOM more heavily than positive eWOM in their decision making (Park & Lee, 2009). Majority of social commerce studies examined consumer behavior by paying attention to information (especially eWOM) seeking behavior (e.g., Bilgihan et al., 2014; Bronner & Hoog, 2014; Chu & Choi, 2011), purchase attitude and purchase intention (e.g., Hajli N., 2015; Ng, 2013; Wang & Chang, 2013; Wang et al., 2012). However, Yadav et al., (2013) argued that social commerce domain should not be distinguished narrowly with only considering the purchasing function of consumer behavior, rather it should encompass exchange-related activities that occur before, during and after a focal transaction. Hence, Yadav et al., (2013) defined social commerce as "exchange related activities that occur in or are influenced by, an

individual's social network in computer-mediated social environments, where the activities correspond to the need recognition, pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages of a focal exchange". Further, Osei and Abenyin (2016), and Zhang and Benyoucef (2016) affirmed the validity of using consumer decision making process stages model to investigate the impact of social commerce on consumer decision making. Many scholars argued that providing a compelling consumer experience in which social interactions are fully inculcated in every stage of the consumer decision making process is a pre requisite for successful social commerce (e.g., Yadav et al., 2013; Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Zhou et al., 2013).

- ## *Social Commerce and Need / Problem Recognition*

Consumer need recognition (problem recognition) arose as a difference between consumer's actual and desired state of affairs. The need is triggered mainly either by the internal stimuli or external stimuli (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). According to social learning theory literature, the social environment plays a significant role in influencing and determining the perceived needs (e.g., Bandura, 1977). Hence, individuals learn about a product or service by observing others, subsequently prompt to adopt the same product or service. Consumer's needs and wants can be motivated by the OSNs (Rad & Benyoucef, 2011). Apparently, OSNs provide the opportunity for consumers to regularly inform and observe about their member activities including information about certain products and services. In fact, OSNs act as the source of inspiration and referrals for the consumer to become aware of the problem or need (Yadav et al., 2013). Cox and Park (2014) affirmed that consumer (i.e. his/her need recognition) can be attracted by SCCs (e.g., Likes and Recommendations) in OSNs. Thus, following proposition can be constructed.

> **P1:** *SCCs have a positive effect on the Need Recognition stage of the consumer decision making.*

- ## *Social Commerce and Information Search*

An individual who is interested in a product or service is likely to search for more information.

Consumers can obtain information from several sources including personal sources, commercial sources, public sources, experiential sources etc. Among these, personal sources have a major influence over consumer behavior as such sources are perceived to be more reliable (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). Precisely, word of mouth is among the compelling information providers as a personal source that assists in consumer decisions. Evolving role of the Internet has increased the number of consumers who are turning to various resources in the Internet including OSNs when searching for information. Among the other roles, OSNs play a special role as an extended personal information source (i.e. allowing to be in a connection with family members, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, etc. in OSNs) predominately driven by the eWOM as an end result of social interaction. Literally, OSNs act as a source of information allowing consumers to search (Yadav et al., 2013). The way consumers communicate and exchange information has widened and enriched with respect to the emergence of OSNs. Moreover, OSNs potentially lowered cost of search. Consumers are provided with extensive options and liberty for actively expressing opinions and information about the products and services in OSNs (Hennig-Thurau, et al., 2010). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) posited that OSNs enable consumers to disseminate information including their personal consumption related experiences with other members in connection, thus such OSNs can be treated as powerful information sources for consumers. Besides, online social networks are rich information sources as members tend to trust the information and opinions from their connections (Power & Phillips-Wren, 2011; Chu & Kim, 2011; Rad & Benyoucef, 2011). In fact, such UGC are more reliable and relevant than information provided by the marketers (Fotis et al., 2012; Bernoff & Li, 2008) and traditional media (Goh et al., 2013). Thus, following proposition can be built.

> **P2:** *SCCs have a positive effect on the Information Search stage of consumer decision making.*

- ## *Social Commerce and Alternative Evaluation*

Generally, consumers analyze all the possible information to evaluate various alternative products

or services and compare them with respective needs and wants (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). OSNs act as an information source allowing consumers to evaluate the alternatives (Yadav et al., 2013). In fact, information available on the OSNs will enable the consumers to evaluate and select the preferred brand. Among the different information sources available within OSNs, UGC by personal sources have a major influence over consumer decisions as such sources are perceived as reliable as well as enable to evaluate products or services for the consumer (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). The impact of OSNs in the pre-purchase phase including the alternative evaluation stage is highly significant as consumers can access the reviews, ratings, and recommendations of the other members of the same community (Wang & Yu, 2015; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2012; Rad & Benyoucef, 2011). Further, the significance is also considerable when such SCCs are from unknown and anonymous consumers as those will reduce the consumers' perceived risk (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2012). Ultimately, consumer generated content over marketer generated content is perceived to be trustworthy information (Bae & Lee, 2011). Thus, following proposition can be realized.

> **P3:** *SCCs have a positive effect on the Alternative Evaluation stage of consumer decision making.*

## • *Social Commerce and Purchase Decision*

Consumers' purchase decision is to buy the most preferred product or service subsequent to forming the buying intention. The preference and even purchase intention does not always result in an actual purchase decision (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). However, intention to purchase is a psychological factor that can strongly lead to actual purchasing behavior (Wang & Yu, 2015). Consumers make important decisions in this stage such as the retailer they wish to purchase from, the timing of the purchase, and other terms and conditions pertaining to the purchase which specific product or service to buy. OSNs act as a source of information allowing consumers to decide what, where and when to buy (Yadav et al., 2013). The social interactions and support from OSNs are significantly influential to intentional and actual purchasing decisions (Wang & Yu, 2015; Hajli N., 2013; Rad & Benyoucef, 2011; Han &

Windsor, 2011). Similarly, Stephen and Galak (2012) concluded that sales were majorly influenced by the socially earned media activities over the traditionally earned media. Moreover, these socially earned media activities have a long-term impact on the sales. Wang and Yu (2015) argued that purchasing information provided by the other members of OSNs can be a strong referral for later consumers purchasing decisions. SCCs in OSNs can provide useful information that can reduce perceived effort and increase the probability of making a better buying decision (Yadav et al., 2013). Thus, following proposition can be constructed.

> **P4:** *SCCs have a positive effect on the Purchase Decision stage of consumer decision making.*

## • *Social Commerce and Post-Purchase Behavior*

Consumers take further actions after the purchase in post-purchase behavior, mainly based on their level of satisfaction (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). Consumers' level of satisfaction will be determined by the gap between consumer expectation and perceived product or service performance. The consumer will be more satisfied when the gap is minimal. Consumer satisfaction is the key to build profitable relationships (Kotler & Armstrong, 2016). Satisfied consumers do repeat purchases, talk favorably about the products and services with others, pay less attention to the competitors' brands and promotions, and consequently establish brand loyalty. Moreover, satisfied consumers tend to purchase other products and services offered by the same company. An unsatisfied consumer responds differently where bad word of mouth travels farther and fast than the good word of mouth tarnishing the consumer attitudes towards the products and services. Social interactions that are happening in OSNs are more often and stronger than traditional interactions. Therefore, post-purchase activities can be likely to happen in OSNs. In fact, OSNs act as a platform for sharing consumption experience and satisfaction. After a purchase, consumers often compare their actual consumption experience with their expectations. Subsequently, consumers may communicate their level of satisfaction to other consumers via OSNs using the SCCs (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Yadav et al. (2013) posited, consumers can recommend through experience and

assist others in the OSNs. Liang et al. (2011) affirmed that social support has a positive impact on continuance intention to use the social commerce and better social support could enhance the consumer loyalty. Motivations of consumers could include validating an opinion, helping or educating others, sharing, bonding, and/or expressing pride associated with specific purchase that can be facilitated by OSNs (Yadav et al., 2013). Social interactions in OSNs significantly increase the likelihood of post purchase behaviors (feedback, reviews, etc.) in the OSN (Wang & Yu, 2015). Thus, following proposition can be constructed.

**P5:** *SCCs have a positive effect on the Post-Purchase Behavior stage of consumer decision making.*

# III. Conceptual Framework

This study adopts the definition given by Yadav et al., (2013) for social commerce as it covers all the stages in the consumer decision making process including the purchasing behavior. In fact, it has broaden the scope of social commerce enabling to comprehensively assess the marketing potential of organizations with respect to the influence of social support. Hence, this research paper develops a model (see; Figure 01) to address the impact of social commerce on consumer decision making process stages from a social support perspective. Complying with Hajli N. (2013), independent variable of the study is SCCs, which are composed with three dimensions: recommendation and referrals, forums and communities, and review and rating. Conforming to the assertion of Yadav et al., (2013), dependent variables of the study are stages of the consumer decision making process: need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision and post purchase behavior. Research propositions (as shown in Figure 01) identified are constructed to investigate the respective impact of SCCs on each consumer decision making stage.
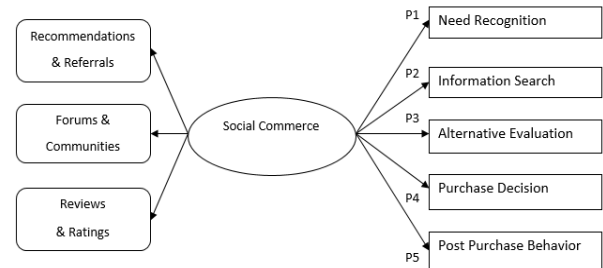


Figure 01: Conceptual Model

# IV. Conclusion

As discussed at the outset, due to the novelty of phenomenon, there are inadequate theoretical models and empirical evidences in the field of consumer behavior in social commerce, which this model development paper intended to address. It was admitted that among the other related fields, this could be the increasingly attracting research field in the near future (e.g., Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016; Liang & Turban, 2011). This paper adopts Yadav et al.'s (2013) definition of social commerce and concentrates the discussion on OSN sites to highlight the "social" dimension of social commerce, complying with the argument by Zhang and Benyoucef (2016). Apparently, available literature lacks a systematic framework followed by empirical investigation that evaluates the few stages, giving a way to an incomplete view to the role of social commerce in decision making process stages. Yadav et al., (2013) coined the fact that implications of social commerce on consumer decision making process stages is worth investigating for firms to leverage.

This paper is intended to comprehend the impact of the social commerce for each consumer decision making stage without concerning the inter-relatedness of the decision making stages. The researchers argue such inter-relatedness could not be determined due to the novelty of the research phenomenon and the lack of literature with empirical support in the context of social commerce. Besides, some consumers may use social commerce for limited stages of the decision making process. Further, there is literature with empirical evidences for assessing independent and dependent variable relationships individually assuming stages of the decision making process (e.g., Song & Yoo, 2016; Wang & Yu, 2015; Hajli N., 2015; Liang et al., 2011). Therefore, if literature assesses dependent variables individually, there is a

clear rationale to bring all the decision steps together in a single research. As a result, this paper intends to comprehend the impact of social commerce towards an integrative model incorporating all the decision steps anticipating new knowledge. However, researchers argue such inter-relatedness of the decision making process stages is beyond this research scope.

Understanding the role of social commerce in consumer behavior improves marketing initiatives as well as gives a better insight about consumers. Moreover, such understanding has a direct implication on the overall performance of the business. Besides, it is paramount for organizations to manage online social platforms effectively as they have significant impact on consumer decisions. It is also important to determine how social commerce driven by social support influences the different stages of the consumer decision making process. Constructive impact of the SCCs on the consumer decision making process stages will enable the brands to be thriving in the market; similarly adverse impact of SCCs on any stage of the consumer decision making process should be treated as destructive. Moreover, such adverse influence is expected to amplify overtime in online social communities embedded with trust in eWOM, and it certainly has a harmful impact on other stages as well. Consequently, potential consumers will be loosen from the seller's hands and existing consumers will shift over to the competitors in no time.

This research model has to be empirically tested to validate and could be extended in the future. Further, this framework is confined to social support perspective of social commerce, but future studies are required to draw a comprehensive model by including other dimensions of the social commerce to investigate the impact on the consumer decision making process stages.

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