

# Consumers' decisions in social commerce context: An empirical investigation



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## ABSTRACT

With the popularity and growth of social networking, consumers often rely on the advice and recommendations from online friends when making purchase decisions. Social commerce in this regard represents a shift in consumers' thinking from inefficient individual-based consumption decisions to collaborative sharing and social shopping. In this study, we investigate social commerce from two different but interrelated angles (i.e., social shopping and social sharing). Built on the literature of social support, commitment-trust theory, and trust transfer theory, a research model was developed and empirically examined. The findings of this study demonstrated that both emotional and informational social support significantly affected consumers' trust and community commitment, which in turn exerted profound impacts on both social shopping and social sharing intention. Trust toward members also can be transferred into trust toward community, which further led to users' community commitment. Limitations and implications for both research and practice are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the increasing popularity of social networking has opened up a new era of electronic commerce, called social commerce, which changes the way we think about online shopping. Social commerce promotes online transactions with the support from a large network of online peers in assisting product/service marketing [1,2], and it is believed to have a huge potential to be a significant revenue generator for businesses in the near future. According to a recent report by HnyB Insights [3], the global social commerce revenue will be consistently growing, and the market is expected to reach \$80 billion U.S. dollars by 2020.

Although social commerce is often regarded as the combination of social media and e-commerce, social commerce, as an emerging and promising field of enquiry, is different from the traditional e-commerce in two important ways. First, social commerce is built on various types of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, or WeChat, and takes all of the key aspects of the social web. Recent work has identified four core features of social media, including digital profile, search and privacy, relational tie, and network transparency, which differentiate social commerce from other Internet retailers such as Amazon and eBay [4]. Second, social commerce focuses on social media-supported commercial activities. Therefore, people can freely share their consumption experience on product or service and ask for advice and suggestions from their online friends, rather than

strangers. By contrast, traditional e-commerce primarily relies on system features such as user-friendly product categorization, search engine, shopping cart, or preference-based recommender systems to enhance the efficiency of online purchase behavior.

Social commerce represents a considerable extension of the traditional e-commerce and brings significant benefits to both business and society, it is thus believed as "one of the most challenging research arenas in the coming decade" [1]. However, current empirical studies on this topic are still limited [5]. A recent survey has found that nearly 83% of respondents tend to share shopping information with their online friends, and almost 67% of the respondents would make their purchase decision based on the recommendations from online friends [6]. As we noted above, social shopping and social sharing thus can be regarded as two most important aspects for social commerce, and it is necessary to pay special attention to consumers' motives to engage in social commerce activities from both sides.

It is also necessary to mention that social shopping and social sharing are different from virtual community-based topic-related user experience and knowledge consumption and provision [7]. This is because social shopping and social sharing are commerce-oriented [8], and the focal activities are often commercial in nature. Therefore, a reliable, trustworthy, and close relationship between the exchange parties is particularly important in social commerce. In fact, relationship has been regarded as the basis for social commerce to succeed [8,9]. Nevertheless, general information consumption and provision are often topic-oriented and frequently occur among virtual community members who produce and consume information contents without a clear commercial purpose.

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Due to the important role of relationship in customers' decisions in social commerce context, we adopt a relational view to build our research model.<sup>1</sup> In particular, commitment-trust theory and trust transfer theory, as two most important and complementary theories in relationship literature [13,14], have been chosen for model building. The two theories were integrated by two types of relationship in social commerce, that is, relationship among members (represented by trust toward members) and relationship between member and social commerce community (represented by trust toward community and community commitment). As relationship building and maintenance are believed to be crucial to the success of social commerce, and relational benefits are regarded as a need to establish a cooperative relationship [13,15], we also investigate the antecedents of relational factors based on the concept of social support. The objective of this study thus is to address how informational and emotional social support promotes relationship building in social commerce context, and what impacts do relational factors exert on social shopping and social sharing intention.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we review the theoretical background for the study. This is followed by a discussion of the research model and the associated research hypotheses. Research methodology and data analysis results are reported in Sections 4 and 5, respectively. In the last section, we discuss the key findings, limitations of this study, and the implications for both research and practice.

## 2. Theoretical background

In this section, we provide a review of the theoretical foundation of this study. In particular, we will discuss commitment-trust theory, trust transfer theory, and the concept of social support.

### 2.1. Commitment-trust theory

The commitment-trust theory is an important theory in relationship marketing research and was originally developed by Morgan and Hunt [13], focusing on the joint impacts of relationship commitment and trust in building and maintaining long-term successful cooperation between the relevant parties. In particular, relationship commitment is defined as “an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it” (p.23), while trust is conceptualized as “existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity” (p.23) [13]. Except for the joint roles of commitment and trust in relationship development, trust also exerts a positive impact on relationship commitment. This theory was widely used and applied to different research contexts in the past several decades, such as inter-organizational relationship [16], buyer–seller relationship [17], and interpersonal relationship [18], and it also has paramount importance in examining relationships formed on the Internet [19,20]. Prior studies also have indicated that it was important to investigate both website–user relationship [21] and relationships among website users [22] in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the benefits and the impacts of online relationship exchange. In this study, we thus adopt a relational view from the two types of relationship and employ the commitment-trust theory to further understand the determinants of social shopping and social sharing intention.

<sup>1</sup> There are several underlying mechanisms for social commerce to occur in a particular situation. For example, Aral et al. [10] discussed the importance of homophily in behavioral contagion. Bapna and Umyarov [11] recently have demonstrated that peer influence and homophily are two well-known rival mechanisms leading to similar behaviors among individuals in a group. Social relationship such as trust was believed to bring up social contagion through homophily and social influence process [12]. In this study, we thus present an attempt to explore this issue in the social commerce context from a relationship management perspective. For a parsimonious reason, we focus on the types of relationship and its antecedents and impacts on social commerce.

### 2.2. Trust transfer theory

Trust transfer occurs when the trust in a known person/entity can be shifted to another relatively unknown person/entity through the associations between them [23,24]. The theoretical basis for trust transference is derived from the attribution theory [25], which helps individuals to make attribution of an event based on the inference drawn from the existing knowledge. Generally speaking, trust transfer process involves three different but related parties, namely, trustor, trustee, and a trusted third party [14]. If a trustor has a strong belief in the trustworthiness of the third party [26], such trust may be transferred to the trustee if there is a close relationship between the trustee and the third party. In this regard, the trustee and the third party are often called as the target and the source of trust transfer, respectively [27], and trust also can be transferred from different sources, such as individuals or a context, using communication or cognitive processes [14]. Recent studies demonstrated that trust transfer can occur both online and offline. For example, it is believed that mutual trust among community members can be transferred to trust toward the virtual community [24,28]. In order to better understand the interplay between different levels of trust in the social commerce community, we will draw on this theory to further examine how member–member trust can be transferred to community–member trust.

### 2.3. Social support

Cobb [29] defined social support as “information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligation” (p.300). The concept of social support has received considerable attention in different disciplines such as mental health and service science. For example, Schaefer et al. [30] found that social support can reduce individuals' psychological health stress. With strong social support, members would perceive being cared for and helped by others. In this regard, they may feel it is obligated to be mindful of the needs of other members in the social networks, and it is thus helpful to build strong relationships with other members [8]. Today, with the rapid development of social media, personal social networks can be further extended to online spaces, such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Online social networks thus become an important source of social support [31].

Social support is often considered as a multi-dimensional construct, including informational support, emotional support, and tangible support [30]. Since individuals are usually intangible in online environment, online social support thus is regarded as “the exchange of verbal as well as nonverbal messages in order to communicate emotional and informational messages that reduce the retriever's stress” (p.124, [32]). As this study tries to understand the social conditions for members to build online relationships, as well as the impacts of such relationships on social commerce intention, we have chosen informational and emotional supports as the two dominant types of social support in this study.

## 3. Research model and hypotheses

This study aims to examine the determinants of social commerce intention from a relational perspective. Fig. 1 depicts the research framework, which reflects the impacts of relational factors (i.e., trust and commitment) on social shopping and social sharing intentions, as well as the role of social support (i.e., informational and emotional support) in relationship building. In this section, the key components of the research model and their interrelationships are addressed.

### 3.1. Community commitment

Relationship commitment reflects a desire to maintain a long-term relationship with other parties [13,19,33]. Prior studies have demonstrated

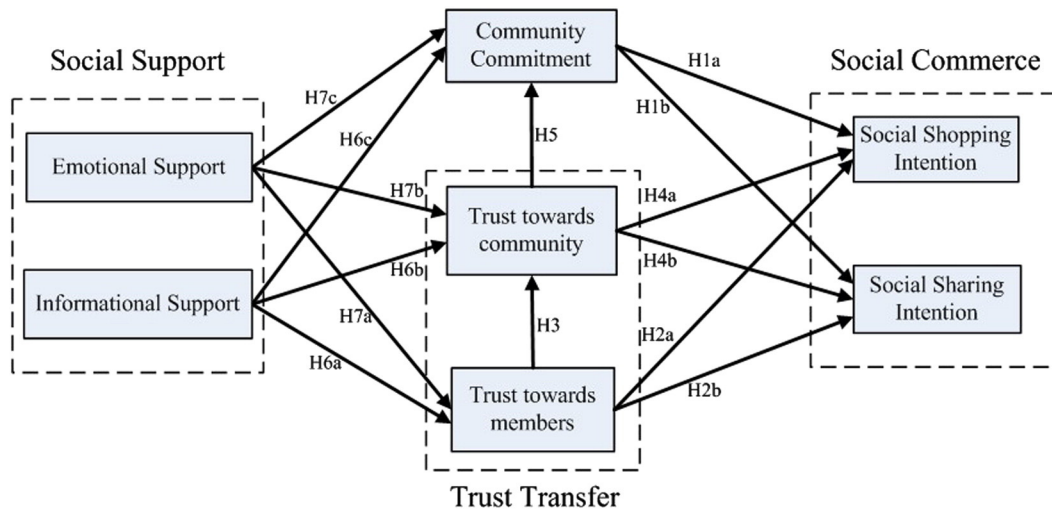


Fig. 1. Research model.

a positive relationship between commitment and user retention [8,19]. It is believed that the higher commitment toward a virtual community, the more an individual contributes to and participates in the community [20,34]. In the social commerce context, online platform provides a shared space for its users to communicate with each other, and people can share their consumption experiences with or receive useful product recommendations from their online friends. In this regard, if an individual is committed to an ongoing relationship with the social commerce community, he/she will make maximum efforts at maintaining it and will be more likely to participate in kinds of social commerce activities in order to help the community grow. Based on the discussion above, we have the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1a.** Community commitment is positively related to social shopping intention.

**Hypothesis 1b.** Community commitment is positively related to social sharing intention.

### 3.2. Trust

Trust is often recognized as an essential element for building a successful relationship [13]. In particular, the relationship between trust in product/service providers and customers' online purchase intention was intensively examined in recent studies [19,20,35,36]. With the proliferation of information on the Internet, consumers tend to seek advice from the community and individuals in whom they can trust. On the other hand, consumers will be more likely to share their own information with trusted parties due to the privacy concern [37]. Therefore, in this section, we will investigate the effect of trust in social commerce context, with insights from both trust toward members and trust toward community.

#### 3.2.1. Trust toward members

In this study, trust toward members is defined as an individual's willingness to rely on the words, actions, and decisions of other members in social commerce community. Prior studies have found that trust toward members positively affected online participatory behaviors, such as getting and giving information in the focal community [38–40]. This is because in a trusting environment, people tend to help each other and further engage in shared social activities. In particular, information obtained from credible sources is usually regarded as more useful, and thus will be used as decision aid [41]. In a similar vein, people prefer to share their product/service consumption

experience when the other side has some trustworthiness attributes (i.e. benevolence, integrity, and ability). This will let them converse easily based on common knowledge background and help to reduce possible opportunistic behaviors. Therefore, we have the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2a.** Trust toward members is positively related to social shopping intention.

**Hypothesis 2b.** Trust toward members is positively related to social sharing intention.

#### 3.2.2. Trust toward community

Trust toward community refers to one's perception of the focal community as a reliable and predictable place for social interaction. Online communities often have commonly accepted standards (written or unwritten) to ensure mutual and reciprocal benefits for its members. As the reciprocal nature of communication lying in the center of virtual community [28], the extent to which community can follow the established rules will directly determine members' participatory activities in the community. In addition, the benevolence and integrity of a community will smooth away users' worry about opportunistic behaviors, such as deceptive advertising or inappropriate use of personal information. The relationship between trust toward a community and customers' loyalty was well established in the literature [30,39,42,43]. In this regard, if an individual has a strong perception of trust toward a community, he/she will be more inclined to seek product/service recommendations from the community and share their own consumption experience on the community. Therefore,

**Hypothesis 3a.** Trust toward community is positively related to social shopping intention.

**Hypothesis 3b.** Trust toward community is positively related to social sharing intention.

According to commitment-trust theory, trust is believed to exert a positive impact on relationship commitment [13]. Recent studies have also demonstrated that trust is a major determinant of commitment in virtual community [20,34]. If members develop a sense of trust toward social commerce community, the uncertainty and risk surrounding communicative activity will be reduced. Relationship characterized by trust is also highly valued, and thus members will have a desire to continue and reinforce the valued relationship

with the community. Following this stream of research, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4.** Trust toward community is positively related to community commitment.

### 3.2.3. Trust transfer

Based on trust transfer theory, it is believed that trust toward community can be developed via interpersonal trust for two reasons. First, trust among members would make the users believe that the provision and transfer of information in the community is likely to be governed by the established principles. This helps the members to be confident that the community will keep on improving service quality and offering effective management to build a trusted communication environment [22,28]. Second, prior studies also pointed out that the existence of interpersonal trust can provide fertile soil for the development of institutional trust [28]. Community members who build strong mutual trust with each other thus will regard the community as a suitable venue for communication. This leads to the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 5.** Trust toward member is positively related to trust toward community.

### 3.3. Social support

With the rapid increase of Internet usage over the last decade, a growing number of people are communicating and connecting online. In particular, the proliferation of social networking sites allows people to interact more easily in an online environment. In this sense, offline social support is gradually turning into social supportive communication in the online context [32,44,45]. Online social support commonly refers to information exchange and emotional interactions within a virtual space, and therefore, informational support and emotional support are regarded as two major approaches for providing online supports [46–48]. In this study, we believe that informational and emotional support will offer relational benefits to the involved parties, and thus help to facilitate relationship building and sustaining in social commerce context.

#### 3.3.1. Informational support

Informational support is the type of support that offers individuals with advice, guidance, or useful information to help them solve problems, generate new ideas, or make good decisions [8]. It is easy to understand that if people can consistently obtain instrumental assistance, such as valuable advice and immediate help from their online friends or from the focal community, they will be more likely to have confidence on the other side's benevolence, integrity, and ability, and further form a feeling of trust toward the information providers [49]. Based on this reasoning, we have the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 6a.** Informational support is positively related to trust toward members.

**Hypothesis 6b.** Informational support is positively related to trust toward community.

As we stated above, relational benefits are often regarded as a need to establish a cooperative relationship [13]. In this regard, if community members can benefit from others' suggestions and opinions, they will be more inclined to recognize the value of the focal community and thus have a desire to maintain a long-term relationship with the community. Hence, we have the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 6c.** Informational support is positively related to community commitment.

#### 3.3.2. Emotional support

Emotional support often refers to the provision of empathy, concern, caring, love, understanding, or encouragement [47], which let the recipient feels he/she is valued. In contrast to informational support, it places a greater emphasis on the emotional aspect of social support and may help to overcome the problems indirectly [32]. Emotional support will help members open up and look for help from other members in the community. In particular, some scholars have demonstrated that caring is the basis for trust development [47]. Therefore, through emotional exchange and connection with other members within the community, people will develop their trust toward other members and the social commerce community. Based on the discussion above, we have the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 7a.** Emotional support is positively related to trust toward members.

**Hypothesis 7b.** Emotional support is positively related to trust toward community.

Furthermore, if members can receive caring and warmth from people who experience similar pain and difficulty, they tend to feel more comfortable to stay in the focal community. This is because the emotional reactions such as caring and love obviously satisfy the member's needs of esteem, affiliation, and social concern, which enable members to identify themselves as belonging to the community and feeling emotionally bounded to the community [50,51]. Hence, we have the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 7c.** Emotional support is positively related to community commitment.

## 4. Research methodology

This study presents an initial attempt to investigate the determinants of social shopping and social sharing intention from the relationship management perspectives. In this section, research setting, data collection method, measurement, and demographics of the respondents are reported below.

### 4.1. Research setting

This study chooses the users of Douban.com, one of the most famous social commerce sites in Mainland China, as the main objects in discussion. Launched on March 2005, Douban allows its users to create reviews on books, film, music, and local events in more than 816 Chinese cities. More important, different from other transaction-oriented websites, such as Amazon, Douban is built on specific interests and shared connections, which allow its users to connect and get to know each other. In this regard, users can create their unique profiles and share their comments on films or books with their online friends. There are a lot of hobby groups in Douban, and users are frequently sharing their shopping experience with and taking advice from their online friends. Therefore, we believe Douban is a perfect website for us to investigate social networking-based commercial activities.

Douban focuses on three types of product, namely, book, film, and music. As to the product category which is used to incorporate into our research design, we have selected Douban Book as a representative example to examine social commerce. There are two reasons for this. First, Douban Book is a major and the earliest function included in this site. There are thousands of book reviews and hobby groups, and Douban Book has a large customer base and a very enthusiastic social networking community for social commerce activities to occur. Second, book reviews also have the potential to stimulate shopping behavior. It was reported that Douban Book brought up more than 200 million RMB revenue for book market each year, and therefore, we believe that Douban Book is a good place to investigate social commerce.



#### 4.2. Data collection

Since this study was conducted in Mainland China, the questionnaire was translated into Chinese first, and then a backward translation method was used to ensure the consistency between the Chinese and the original English version of the questionnaire. Before initiating data collection, a pilot test was conducted with ten PhD students majoring in information systems, in order to check the face validity of survey instruments, refine the questionnaire wordings, assess logical consistencies, judge ease of understanding, and identify areas for improvement. Overall, the questionnaire was regarded as concise and easy to complete. They also proposed some suggestions concerning the format and wording of the questions, and these suggestions were further incorporated in the revised version of the questionnaire.

An online survey was then conducted. Since no emailing list was available to reach all registered users in Douban, we have randomly sent our invitation messages to people who have a homepage on Douban. In addition, in order to maximize the possible responses, we also posted invitation messages in some popular hobby groups of Douban Book, and people who visit these groups will have the opportunity to access our online questionnaire. This study was introduced as an “opinion survey,” and the respondents were asked to recall their recent social commerce experience with online friends that they frequently interact with in Douban Book. They were then asked to complete the questionnaire based on their own experience in Douban Book. Opinion survey is commonly used in the literature to understand how the respondents feel about the target objects (e.g., [52,40]), i.e. social commerce activities in Douban Book for this study. In this regard, a screening question asking if they had read and written book reviews in Douban Book was used to ensure that all the successful respondents have some prior experience with social commerce activities in Douban Book. This conduct is also consistent with previous studies that adopted screening question to identify the most appropriate respondents (e.g., [53]).

In addition, as we stated above, Douban is a social networking-based product rating website and was initiated from the idea that purchase decisions often come from friends' recommendations. Therefore, it is the common knowledge among its users that Douban is an online community where people can share and find opinions about products (book specifically in this study) easily from their peers. Respondents then complete the questionnaire based on this common knowledge. Finally, a total of 376 valid responses were obtained.

#### 4.3. Measures

All the measures in this study have been used and validated in prior studies (see Appendix A). Minor changes in the wordings were made so as to fit the current research context. Emotional support and informational support were measured with items adapted from Liang et al. [8]. Community commitment was measured with items adapted from Bateman et al. [34]. Trust toward community was measured by items adapted from Liang et al. [8], and trust toward members was measured by items adapted from Chang and Chuang [54] and Chow and Chan [55]. In addition, social shopping and social sharing intentions were measured using items adapted from Liang et al. [8]. Instruments for all the constructs were phrased on a seven-point Likert scales, anchored from “1 = strongly disagree” and “7 = strongly agree.”

#### 4.4. Sample characteristics

The demographic statistics of the respondents are reported in Table 1. Among the respondents, 47.34% of them were male and 52.66% were female. A large majority of the respondents (60.37%) were aged below 25. Approximately 89.63% of the respondents have completed university education at the undergraduate level or above. In addition, most of them (81.12%) have used Douban Book for more

**Table 1**  
Demographic statistics (N = 376).

Characteristics	Freq.	Percent (%)	Characteristics	Freq.	Percent (%)
Age			Gender		
≤25	227	60.37	Male	178	47.34
26–30	82	21.81	Female	198	52.66
>30	67	17.82	<b>Usage experience with Douban</b>		
<b>Education</b>			≤12 months	71	18.88
≤Junior college	39	10.37	1–2 years	97	25.80
Undergraduate	232	61.70	3–4 years	96	25.53
≥Postgraduate	105	27.93	>4 years	112	29.79
<b>In the past 3 months, how many reviews you have read from Douban Book?</b>			<b>In the past 3 months, how many reviews you have posted on Douban Book?</b>		
≤10	90	23.94	≤1	171	45.48
11–15	84	22.34	2–3	118	31.38
16–30	99	26.33	4–5	38	10.11
>30	103	27.39	≥6	49	13.03

than 1 year, with more than 5 hours (71.81%) spent on and more than 4 visits (75.27%) to this site per week.

#### 4.5. Non-response bias

Non-response bias is estimated by comparing the early respondents with the late respondents. This approach is the most commonly used means for non-response error estimation in IS research [56]. To examine the non-response bias, the sample was first split into four quartiles based on the time stamp of the response. By comparing the first quartile responses to the last quartile, no significant differences in gender ( $p = 0.77$ ), age ( $p = 0.55$ ), education ( $p = 0.43$ ), usage experience ( $p = 0.14$ ), read ( $p = 0.72$ ) and write ( $p = 0.24$ ) book reviews were found. On the basis of these findings, it is assumed that non-response bias is not a serious concern in this study.

#### 4.6. Common method bias

In order to assess the degree of common method bias, we first performed Harman's single-factor test [57]. The measurement items were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis. The results of the principal components factor analysis revealed that no single factor explained most of the variance, indicating the common method bias is not a serious threat in this study. Following Podsakoff et al. [57] and Liang et al. [65], we further included a common method factor into our hypothesized model and allowed all constructs' indicators to be associated reflectively with the this factor. The results indicated that all substantive factor loadings were significant and high (average 0.917 and lowest 0.730), and the method factor loadings were low and non-significant (average 0.000 and highest 0.153). The average substantively explained variance of the indicator is 0.847, while the average common method-based variance is 0.005. The ratio of substantive variance to method variance is about 169:1, suggesting that common method bias is not a problem in this study.

### 5. Results

SmartPLS Version 2.0 was used for data analysis. Partial least squares approach was employed in this study as it is a component-based statistical technique for causal modeling [58]. As a structural equation modeling technique, PLS analyzes the measurement model and the structural model simultaneously in one operation. The reason why we have chosen PLS was also due to the fact that PLS has less stringent sample size and indicator distribution requirements, as compared to the covariance-based SEM approaches, such as LISREL [59]. Following the two-step data analytical procedures [60], the measurement model was first examined to evaluate reliability and validity of measures, and then the structural model was tested to estimate the hypothesized relationships.

### 5.1. Measurement model

The measurement model was examined in terms of convergent validity and discriminant validity. Convergent validity can be assessed by examining the composite reliability and the average variance extracted [60]. In particular, composite reliability refers to the internal consistency of the indicators measuring a given factor, and average variance extracted indicates the amount of variance captured by a construct as compared to the variance caused by the measurement error. A composite reliability of 0.70 or above and an average variance extracted of more than 0.50 are deemed acceptable [61]. As shown in Table 2, all measures exceed the recommended thresholds, with the composite reliability ranges from 0.915 to 0.982, and the average variance extracted ranges from 0.781 to 0.948.

Discriminant validity was assessed by checking if the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct is greater than the correlations between that construct and all other constructs [61]. Table 3 presents the correlation matrix of the constructs and the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct. The results demonstrate satisfactory discriminant validity of the measurements.

### 5.2. Structural model

The results of the analysis are depicted in Fig. 2, which presents the overall explanatory power, the estimated path coefficients (all significant paths are indicated with asterisks), and the associated t-value of the paths. Test of significance of all paths were performed using the bootstrap re-sampling procedure. A large proportion of the variance in social shopping intention (44.4%) and social sharing intention (31.8%) were explained by commitment-trust theory. In addition, this model also accounted for 59.9% of the variance in community commitment, 42% of the variance in trust toward community, and 25.1% of the variance in trust toward members. After running the model with age, gender, and usage experience as the control variables, none of them had a significant effect on either social shopping intention or social sharing intention.

The results demonstrated that informational support exerts great effect on relational factors, with path coefficients at 0.349, 0.188, and 0.329 on community commitment, trust toward community, and trust toward members, respectively. Emotional support also has significant impacts on community commitment and trust toward members, with path

**Table 3**  
Correlations between constructs.

	INFSU	EMOSU	TTM	TTC	CC	SHOP	SHAR
Informational support (INFSU)	<b>0.93</b>						
Emotional support (EMOSU)	0.71	<b>0.97</b>					
Trust toward members (TTM)	0.48	0.44	<b>0.91</b>				
Trust toward community (TTC)	0.49	0.45	0.60	<b>0.88</b>			
Community commitment (CC)	0.69	0.65	0.51	0.60	<b>0.91</b>		
Social shopping intention (SHOP)	0.53	0.43	0.56	0.60	0.52	<b>0.89</b>	
Social sharing intention (SHAR)	0.47	0.50	0.40	0.51	0.49	0.51	<b>0.94</b>

Note: The bold numbers in the diagonal row are square roots of the average variance extracted.

coefficients at 0.27 and 0.212, respectively, whereas the relationship between emotional support and trust toward community is not significant.

The findings further indicated that trust toward social commerce community exerts the strongest impact on social shopping and social sharing intentions, with path coefficients at 0.335 and 0.315, respectively. This is followed by community commitment, which is found to have significant impacts on social shopping and social sharing, with path coefficients at 0.185 and 0.26, respectively. Trust toward members imposes an influence on social shopping intention, with a path coefficient at 0.261. However, the relationship between trust toward members and users' social sharing intention is not statistically significant. This may be caused by the full mediation effect of trust toward community. As we expected, one's trust toward other members could improve trust toward the social commerce community as a whole ( $\beta = 0.464$ ), which further leads to community commitment ( $\beta = 0.306$ ).

In order to further examine the mediating effect of trust toward community on the relationship between trust toward members and social commerce intention, we have performed the mediation test following the four steps outlined by Baron and Kenny [62]. As described in Table 4, the results demonstrated that trust toward community fully mediates the impact of trust toward members on social sharing intention, while partially mediates the impact of trust toward members on social shopping intention. The total effect of trust toward members on social shopping intention is 0.56, while its total effect on social sharing intention is 0.397. Trust toward members also has a significant direct

**Table 2**  
Construct reliability and validity.

Constructs	Items	Loadings	t-value	Mean	Variance	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Informational support	INFSU1	0.876	35.334	4.59	2.280	0.949	0.861
	INFSU2	0.959	106.416	4.38	2.518		
	INFSU3	0.946	97.101	4.46	2.398		
Emotional support	EMOSU1	0.970	142.305	4.37	2.361	0.982	0.948
	EMOSU2	0.979	217.993	4.45	2.520		
	EMOSU3	0.973	150.835	4.35	2.532		
Trust toward members	TTM1	0.884	42.228	3.95	2.150	0.935	0.827
	TTM2	0.937	73.508	4.10	1.965		
	TTM3	0.906	64.184	4.40	2.038		
Trust toward community	TTC1	0.859	44.295	4.50	2.011	0.915	0.781
	TTC2	0.873	38.057	4.91	2.339		
	TTC3	0.919	74.559	4.86	2.281		
Community commitment	CC1	0.910	71.218	4.53	2.458	0.948	0.821
	CC2	0.909	58.860	4.34	2.634		
	CC3	0.901	64.003	4.45	2.403		
	CC4	0.903	55.102	4.32	2.769		
Social shopping intention	SHOP1	0.877	39.011	4.93	2.346	0.919	0.791
	SHOP2	0.871	39.034	4.28	2.790		
	SHOP3	0.919	64.222	4.64	2.478		
Social sharing intention	SHAR1	0.934	63.535	5.09	2.105	0.958	0.884
	SHAR2	0.950	76.404	5.19	1.931		
	SHAR3	0.936	74.961	5.27	1.901		

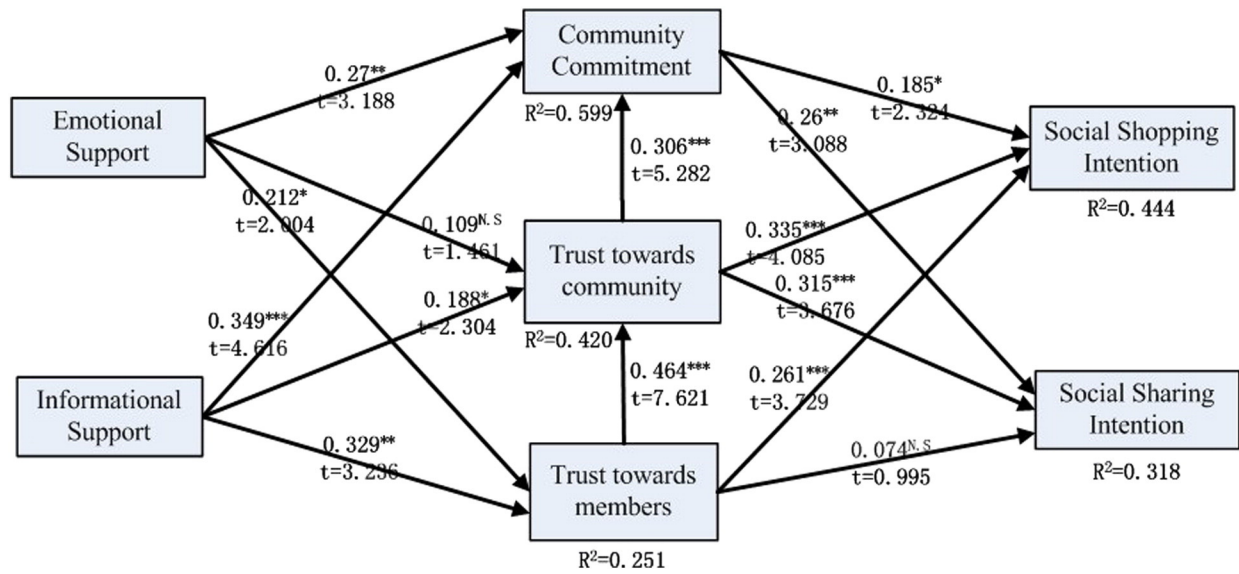


Fig. 2. Results of the PLS analysis.

effect (0.304) on social shopping intention, besides the indirect effect (0.256) through trust toward community.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The prevalence of social networking brings new challenges and opportunities to both research and business. For example, social network-based prediction market recently has been proven to produce better prediction results due to information exchange in social networks [63]. In particular, social commerce becomes a rapidly growing area of research which requires urgent attention and is believed as the “next big thing” by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg. This study thus represents an initial attempt to explore social commerce intention from a relationship management perspective. A research model built on commitment-trust theory, trust transfer theory, and social support was empirically examined with 376 survey data. The measurement model was confirmed with adequate convergent and discriminant validity for all the measures. The results supported most of the proposed hypotheses. Discussion of the key findings, limitations of this study, as well as the implications for both research and practice are presented in the following sections.

### 6.1. Discussion of key findings

This study investigates consumers' decisions in social commerce context. In particular, social commerce is conceptualized as having two components: social sharing and social shopping, and the results suggested that community commitment and users' trust toward

community were the two most important antecedents of both intentions. This is also consistent with prior studies that demonstrated relationship quality between a customer and a service provider would lead to higher customer loyalty [8]. As we have identified two types of relationship in social commerce context including member–community relationship (i.e., community commitment and trust toward community) and member–member relationship (i.e., trust toward members), an interesting finding is that member–member relationship only has an impact on social shopping intention, and its effect on social sharing intention is fully mediated by member–community relationship through trust transfer process in this study. Taken together, these findings support the idea that social shopping, where shoppers' friends become involved in the shopping decisions and social interactions that frequently take place during the shopping process, is affected by one's relationships with the community and with other trustworthy members. However, as to social/collaborative sharing, the extent to which an individual will share his/her consumption experience in the social commerce community greatly depends on his/her relationship with the community as a whole. In this regard, one's trust toward other members may not have a direct effect on social sharing intention, but contribute through trust toward the focal community.

Both informational support and emotional support were found to be significant determinants of users' trust and commitment, except for the relationship between emotional support and trust toward community. This observation strongly supports our previous hypotheses that social support plays a very important role in the relationship building and maintenance in social commerce context. This finding is also consistent with previous literature in social psychology that suggested if individuals receive relational benefits such as being cared for and being helped by others, they will form a positive relationship with the other side [15,29]. The insignificant effect of emotional support on trust toward community may be caused by the fact that trust toward members exerted a pronounced impact on trust toward community, and thus weakened the direct effect of emotional support. In this regard, perceived emotional support exerted its impact on trust toward community indirectly through trust toward members.

Overall, the results of this study suggested that social support explained a large proportion of the variance in relational factors, which in turn exerted profound impacts on both social shopping and social sharing intention.

**Table 4**  
Results of mediating effect test.

IV	M	DV	IV → DV	IV → M	IV + M → DV		Mediating
					IV → DV	M → DV	
TTM	TTC	SHAR	0.397***	0.607***	0.135 N.S.	0.433***	Full
TTM	TTC	SHOP	0.560***	0.607***	0.304**	0.421***	Partial

\* p < 0.05.

\*\* p < 0.01.

\*\*\* p < 0.001.

N.S. Not significant.

## 6.2. Limitations and future research

Before highlighting the implications for research and practice, the limitations of this study are addressed and discussed. First of all, our data were collected from Douban Book, which is a shopping community located in Mainland China and focuses on the exchange of book comments among online friends. Social commerce in China continues to expand but is still at the early stage of development. In addition, it is obvious that social commerce is a much broader concept which covers other community categories, such as group shopping sites like Groupon, or social shopping marketplaces like Shopcade, and other product categories, such as movies or music. Therefore, the generalization of the findings to other economic and cultural contexts and to other community/product categories should be made with caution. Second, due to the self-selected nature of the online survey, the respondents of this study were likely to be active participants of social commerce activities. In this regard, the results of this study are not representative of the entire population of the website. Although active users are more familiar with the research context, future research could consider using other research methods, such as ethnography and experiment, to balance the active and the inactive respondents. Third, as we discussed above, there are several mechanisms that may contribute to social commerce activities. Although the overall research model explained 44.4% of the variance in social shopping and 31.8% of the variance in social sharing, future research should nonetheless examine other underlying mechanisms. It would be better to evaluate the relative importance of different influence mechanisms and incorporate some other important factors such as peer influence, homophily, and herding in the future research, in order to give a more complete view of social commerce. Fourth, we have not distinguished between initial intention and continuance intention in the current study. Instead, we have employed a general measure of intention to examine the two components of social commerce. Although this treatment is quite common in the literature, we also suggested future research can extend this line of research and investigate the different motivational antecedents of initial and continuance social commerce intentions. Last but not the least, it is worthwhile and necessary to conduct a social network analysis, which may help to distinguish between different underlying mechanisms. Due to the difficulty in collecting social network data at this stage, we leave this work for future research.

## 6.3. Implications for research

This study contributes to the existing literature in the following three important ways. First of all, we have examined consumers' decisions in social commerce context with insights from both social sharing and social shopping. It is important to notice that people engage in social commerce activities through contributing their knowledge and consumption experience to the community or considering others' advice and recommendations before making an actual purchase decision. Academic attention to the two aspects thus will generate a more comprehensive picture of social commerce and further improve our current understanding of this emerging phenomenon.

Second, we have built our research model based on a relationship management perspective. A relational view is very important in social commerce research because the success of social commerce greatly depends on a healthy and sustainable relationship within the focal community. In this regard, prior studies have demonstrated that relational ties can be regarded as the core feature of social media [4], and the foundation for social commerce to explode [8]. Commitment-trust theory and trust transfer theory were employed as the theoretical basis for understanding the relationships that people have developed with the social commerce community and other community members. The results indicated that relational factors together explained 44.4% of the variance in social shopping intention and 31.8% of the variance in social sharing intention. In addition, an interesting finding was that

relationships with both community and other members exhibited similar importance to social shopping intention, whereas social sharing intention was only affected by users' relationship with the whole community. In this sense, our finding may further contribute to current literature on trust transfer theory by demonstrating that the effect of trust toward members on social sharing intention is fully mediated by users' trust toward social commerce community. As a key issue in social commerce research, social relationship perspective certainly deserves an in-depth examination to determine to what extent different dimensions of relationship quality facilitate social commerce. This study thus may offer a unique contribution to social commerce research on this.

Third, we have investigated the role of social support in online relationship building. Interaction and relationship are regarded as the basis for social commerce community to grow and expand, and in this regard, social support provides a supportive and friendly environment in which people are more likely to interact with each other for mutual benefits and further build strong relationships [47,64]. Informational support and emotional support are considered to be the two most important dimensions of social support in the social commerce context. The results indicated that informational support has a fundamental importance in predicting users' relationships with both the community and its members. This finding is consistent with the fact that social commerce community is maintained and cultivated with the primary purpose of commercial information exchange and shopping-related problems solving. Emotional support also played its role in relationship development by contributing to the enhanced community commitment and mutual trust. Compared to informational support focusing on providing messages, in the form of recommendations and advice in social commerce community, emotional support places a great emphasis on community caring and compassion, which is also vital to relationship building in social commerce community. A detailed understanding of the two types of social support and their impacts on the different dimensions of relationship quality thus may contribute a lot to the social support literature.

## 6.4. Implications for practice

The finding of this study also provides useful guidance to social commerce community managers and businessman who plans to leverage social commerce to reap future benefits. First of all, social shopping and social sharing are labeled as the two most important components of social commerce. Practitioners who are passionate in social commerce thus should pay special attention to both facets. In particular, they may consider providing more convenient one-click sharing function to social commerce platforms and encouraging community users to share high-quality contents by incentivizing them with monetary or virtual rewards. In addition, practitioners could push hot topics and product experts to the potential consumers based on their previous browsing and search history, in order to promote possible social shopping activities.

Second, relational factors play an important role in facilitating social commerce. Based on this finding, practitioners thus should consider how to develop and sustain mutually beneficial and long-term relationships within the social commerce community. Trust and community commitment can be regarded as the foundation of such relationships. In particular, it is necessary to keep in mind that both the relationships with other community members and the relationships with the whole community are important. A trusting and comfortable atmosphere should be encouraged in the social commerce community to facilitate interpersonal trust and group bonding. Online and offline community activities, for example, is an effective way to build mutual trust among community members. In addition, to be considered trustworthy, the community must demonstrate a capacity for long-term management of the site and provide prompt and reliable services.

Third, both informational support and emotional support are proven effective for relationship building and maintenance in social commerce



community. In a friendly and supportive environment, users can be socialized to get along with each other and further build a good relationship with other members and the community as well. Practitioners thus should consider encouraging the two types of social support in the community. For example, they can help users solve problems by notifying people who may provide the needed answers or stimulate community discussions related to common topics to help members exchange useful information and relieve stress.

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## Appendix A

### Informational support [8]

- INFSU1 On the Douban, some people would offer suggestions when I needed help.
- INFSU2 When I encountered a problem, some people on the Douban would give me information to help me overcome the problem.
- INFSU3 When faced with difficulties, some people on the Douban would help me discover the cause and provide me with suggestions.

### Emotional support [8]

- EMOSU1 When faced with difficulties, some people on the Douban are on my side with me.
- EMOSU2 When faced with difficulties, some people on the Douban comforted and encouraged me.
- EMOSU3 When faced with difficulties, some people on the Douban expressed interest and concern in my well-being.

### Trust toward members [54,55]

- TTM1 Members in Douban will always try and help me out if I get into difficulties.
- TTM2 Members in Douban will always keep the promises they make to one another.
- TTM3 Members in Douban are truthful in dealing with one another.

### Trust toward community [8]

- TTC1 The performance of Douban always meets my expectations.
- TTC2 Douban can be counted on as a good social networking site.
- TTC3 Douban is a reliable social networking site.

### Community commitment [34]

- CC1 I have a real emotional attachment to Douban.
- CC2 I feel a strong connection to Douban.
- CC3 I feel a sense of belonging toward the Douban.
- CC4 I feel like a part of the group at Douban.

### Social shopping intention [8]

- SHOP1 I will consider the shopping experiences of other members on the Douban when I want to shop.

SHOP2 I will ask other members on the Douban to provide me with their suggestions before I go shopping.

SHOP3 I am willing to buy the products recommended by other members on the Douban.

### Social sharing intention [8]

SHAR1 I am willing to provide my experiences and suggestions when other members on the Douban want my advice on buying something.

SHAR2 I am willing to share my own shopping experience with other members on the Douban.

SHAR3 I am willing to recommend a product that is worth buying to other members on the Douban.

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