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# Trust development and transfer in social commerce: prior experience as moderator

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the nature of social commerce trust, and how it impacts company trust and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) intention based on trust transfer theory. The authors also examine how customers' prior transaction experience could impact their social commerce trust development and the trust transfer process.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The proposed research model is empirically examined using a survey method consisting of 375 users of a social commerce web site (SCW). The statistical analysis applies a method based on variance using partial least squares.

**Findings** – The results confirm positive impacts of social commerce trust on company trust, and their subsequent influences on consumers' eWOM intention. Also, consumers' prior experience is found to moderate the trust transfer process from information-based social commerce trust to company trust.

**Originality/value** – The present study is one of the first few studies that attempts to explain trust development and transfer with SCWs with a theoretical foundation as well as examine the role of consumers' prior experience during trust transfer. It provides practical guidance for the improvement of trust and eWOM in social commerce.

**Keywords** Trust, Electronic word of mouth, Social commerce, Social networking sites, Trust transfer

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Social commerce represents a new form of doing online business which is mediated by social media. Companies are increasingly exploring the potential of the social commerce web site (SCW) to transmit their promotional information to customers and improve brand awareness using electronic word of mouth (eWOM) principles (de Vries *et al.*, 2012). The social interactions and information exchanging in SCWs are recognized as rich sources to create eWOM marketing effects (Jansen *et al.*, 2009). Customers can make better-informed purchasing decisions by viewing the opinions, experiences, and product-related information shared by others in SCWs. On the other hand, companies can also improve business performance by attracting potential customers through positive recommendations by existing consumers (Stephen and Toubia, 2010). Prior studies point out that trust in the online environment is a crucial antecedent of consumers' intention to spread eWOM (Gummerus *et al.*, 2012). Zheng *et al.* (2013) also



indicate that trust should be enhanced in business-centered social networking communities in order to encourage more helpful WOM communications.

Extant literature investigating trust in online business environments mainly focusses on consumer trust in e-commerce (e.g. Palvia, 2009). However, with the growing popularity of social commerce, more attention should be paid on how trust develops in such a highly interactive online business environment. Unlike e-commerce web sites which mainly focus on direct online transactions, SCWs emphasize on social interactions which produce business opportunities. In e-commerce, consumer trust has been mainly measured by the trustworthiness of companies (e.g. integrity, competence, benevolence) (McKnight *et al.*, 2002). Consumers may evaluate the trustworthiness of companies in e-commerce through direct online shopping experiences. However, in the social commerce context, many consumers are in an attempt to gather more product-related information before they actually buy from the company (Yadav *et al.*, 2013). Specifically, customers can derive product-related information from the company as well as from other customers in SCWs. In such cases, trust is important for customers to evaluate the quality of information from various sources, and serves as a foundation for their sharing of information with others. Thus, understanding the nature of trust in social commerce context has significant meanings for understanding consumer information sharing behaviors and improving online marketing effectiveness. In addition, according to trust transfer theory (Ng, 2013), it is expected that consumer trust in SCWs would be transferred to their related sources. In this manner, a customer's trust in a company's SCW could be transferred to their trust in the company. Given that companies using SCWs are eager to convert online fans into real brand advocates (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), it is important to understand how consumer trust developed in social commerce context may influence their actual trust in companies.

In addition, previous studies argue that particular contextual conditions would impact how trust operates (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). For example, customers' prior experience with the company may impact their social commerce trust and also impact how social commerce trust transfers to company trust. However, in social commerce context, the understanding of how the trust development and transfer process is affected by customers' conditions is still limited. As a step toward bridging the above gaps, this study aims to propose a theory-based model to investigate how consumer trust develops in the social commerce context, and how such trust impacts consumer trust in companies and their eWOM intentions. Our model also considers customers' conditions by examining the moderating effect of their prior experience on the relationship between social commerce trust and company trust.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, we review prior literature on social commerce and trust. Second, we propose our research model and draw hypotheses. Next, we describe the research methodology and present the result findings. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and managerial implications of the studies and directions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 The SCW

With the increasingly popularity of social networking sites (SNS), businesses are actively exploring the potentials of such technologies for doing commerce. Social commerce has emerged as the latest innovation of doing online business by combining the power of SNS with e-commerce (Shen, 2012). Traditional e-commerce tends to pay much attention on improving the effectiveness of online shopping by providing superior features such as

product vividness, product search, and personalized shopping experiences (Gefen and Straub, 2004). In contrast, the distinctive characteristic of social commerce is the focus on supporting social interactions and collaborations of online shopping experience (Liang and Turban, 2011).

Liang and Turban (2011) defined social commerce as commercial and social activities via the social media environment. Ng (2013) stated that the SCW mainly includes two types. The first type of SCWs permits users to directly purchase products on the web site (e.g. Groupon USA). The second type of SCWs does not support direct transactions but aims at online marketing and promoting only (e.g. fan pages in Facebook). For all forms of SCWs, there are three major attributes: social media technologies, community interactions, and commercial activities (Liang and Turban, 2011). Combined with these features, SCWs allow customers with similar interests to exchange product feedbacks and to provide information that may influence others' purchasing decisions (de Vries *et al.*, 2012). In the meantime, companies can engage with customers in a more efficient manner (Curty and Zhang, 2011), as well as increase brand awareness, boost business opportunities, and maintain more profitable and closing customer relationships.

Social connections are recognized as the unique characteristics of social commerce, and they can be built between companies and users, and among users. (Curty and Zhang, 2011). Such connections allow companies to effectively deliver promoting information to target audience, and allow users to exchange product-related experiences in order to make better-informed purchasing decisions (Stephen and Toubia, 2010). In addition, social connections provide great opportunities for companies to encourage customers' positive eWOM. Jansen *et al.* (2009) suggest that social connections among Twitter users have the potential to substantially influence eWOM branding, which influences brand image and awareness. Yang (2012) also confirms that the message sharing in Facebook fan pages can influence customers' behaviors such as eWOM intention.

## 2.2 Trust

Trust is generally defined as "as a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence" (Moorman *et al.*, 1993, p. 82). In the context of e-commerce, the final transaction does not involve with the actual physical contact between customers and companies. Hence consumer trust in e-commerce is mainly built upon online shopping experiences, and it represents the confidence in certain attributes of the company. Extant literature offers various views to measure the trustworthiness of company in e-commerce. Among them, three trusting beliefs are utilized most often: benevolence (i.e. care about customers and willing to act in customers' interests), competence (i.e. ability of the company to fulfill customers' needs), and integrity (i.e. honesty and promise keeping).

In social commerce context, direct transactions may not be involved between customers and companies. Social commerce focusses on social interactions and content contributions in the community (Stephen and Toubia, 2010). Many customers join companies' SCWs in order to gather more information before they make purchasing decisions (Liang *et al.*, 2011). According to Kim *et al.* (2009), initial trust could be formed before a customer actually uses a service/product. Therefore, unlike in e-commerce where trust is built upon online transaction experiences, trust in social commerce may be built upon customer experiences in the interactive communities of SCWs. In order to gain a better understanding of trust nature in social commerce, we conducted a literature review to understand consumer trust in SNS and online consumer community, which are related to our research context (see Table I).

As shown in Table I, trust in the context of SNS and online community is conceptualized as including mainly two aspects: information (or technology) – related, and interpersonal related. Leimeister *et al.* (2005) point out that in online communities, the concept of trust is based on both community characteristics and interpersonal relationships. Hsu *et al.* (2007) share a similar view, suggesting that trust in online communities may be built upon the benefits derived from information and knowledge in the community, and also upon the identification with other members in the community.

In our study context, the major characteristic of SCWs is the dissemination of brand information to customers (Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2011). The brand information allows customers to better assess the quality (e.g. honesty and integrity) of companies in SCWs. Therefore, social commerce trust may be largely based on the information quality, such as accuracy, reliability, and objectivity (Grabner-Kräuter, 2009). On the other hand, customers' interpersonal trust in the SCW may be based on their identification with others. Such an identification enables customers to make emotional investments in trust relationships, express concern for the welfare of partners, and work together to create collective strengths (McAllister, 1995). Similarly, the trustworthiness (e.g. honesty, integrity, benevolence) of other members can also be transferred to related source (i.e. the SCWs) (Ng, 2013). According to See-To and Ho (2014), since members of a social networking community often generate eWOM that influences others, the trustworthiness of these members could significantly impact the trustworthiness of this community. Westerlund *et al.* (2009) also indicate that trust in social networking communities can be understood in the context of interpersonal relationships.

Based on above, we thus conceptualize that trust in the SCW includes two dimensions: information-based trust and identification-based trust. Information-based trust represents customers' trust in the information that posted in the SCW, including information from companies and from other customers. Identification-based trust represents customers' trust in other members in the SCW, which is based on the trustworthiness of other customers.

### 2.3 Trust transfer theory

Previous studies show that trust may be transferred from one source to another, and even be transferred from offline to online context or vice versa. For example, trust in public administration can be transferred to trust in public e-services (Belanche *et al.*, 2014), trust in an offline bank is transferable to trust in its online banking services (Lee *et al.*, 2007), and trust in a social network community may also be transferred from trust among its members (Ng, 2013).

Literature	Trust's dimensions		Research contexts
Ba (2001)	Information based	Transference based	Online community
Leimeister <i>et al.</i> (2005)	System based	Interpersonal based	Online community
Hsu <i>et al.</i> (2007)	Information based	Identification based	Online community
Grabner-Kräuter (2009)	Technology related	Personal related	SNS
Kosonen (2009)	Trust in knowledge quality	Trust in members	Online community
Westerlund <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Technology trust	Interpersonal trust	SNS
Fang and Chiu (2010)	Trust in informational justice	Trust in members	Online community
Hsiao <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Trust in web site	Trust in social network	Online community
Benlian and Hess (2011)	Quality assured content based	Interpersonal based	Online community
Lankton and McKnight (2011)	Technology related	Interpersonal related	SNS

**Table I.**  
Trust in SNS and  
online consumer  
community

According to trust transfer theory, trust transfer occurs when “the unknown target [is] being perceived as related to the source of the transferred trust” (Stewart, 2003, p. 6). As such, trust transfer is based on a cognitive process in which the perception of relatedness between one source and another source of trust induces transfer. Such perception of relatedness between two entities is mainly based on their similarity, closeness, and common fate (Campbell, 1958). For a group of members, relatedness between the group and its members may also be dependent on the perception of “entitativity,” which may be caused by the kind of interaction involved in the group such as playing on a sports team (Lickel *et al.*, 2000), forming a business partnership, and forming a social network community (Uzzi, 1996).

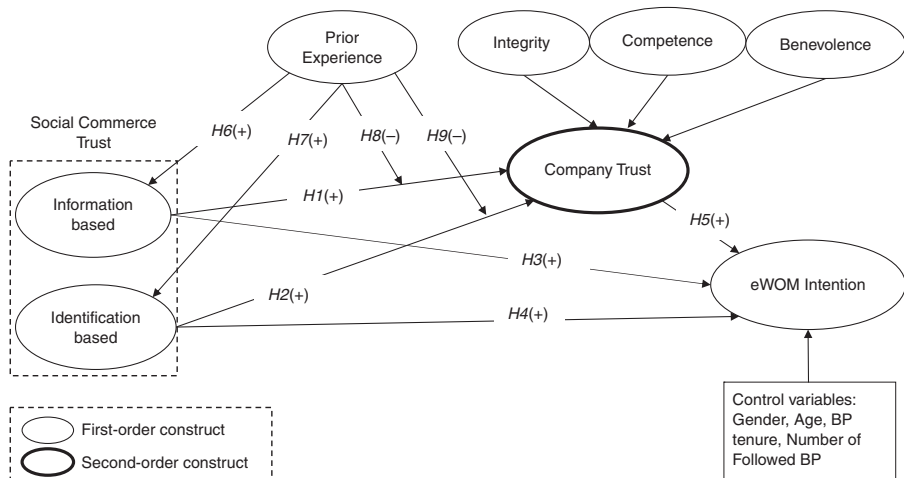
In a SCW, companies involved with social commerce activities could be seen as members of this web site. Companies and their brand pages are important parts of a SCW, and customers often interact closely with companies when they participate in a SCW (Stephen and Toubia, 2010). In addition, companies in the SCW generally share the same goal with the web site – promoting online commercial activities and interactions (Yadav *et al.*, 2013). Such perceptions of similarity, closeness, and common fate between the SCW and involved companies may induce customers’ perception of relatedness between these two entities. In this manner, trust developed in a SCW may be expected to transfer to trust in related companies in this web site.

### 3. Research model and hypotheses development

In this section, we derive the hypotheses based on theoretical base and propose our research model as shown in Figure 1.

#### 3.1 Social commerce trust and company trust

Information-based trust represents the information trustworthiness (e.g. accuracy, validity, and reliability) perceived by customers in SCWs. Trust in the information provided by a company in the SCW indicates that the customer believes that this company is honest and does not make false statements. Previous studies also suggest that the trustworthiness of brand communities can be a major source for consumers to establish trust in the company that host this brand community (Grabner-Kräuter, 2009).



Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that consumer trust in the information delivered in SCWs may contribute to their trust in the company which presents the information:

*H1.* Information-based trust in a company's SCW is positively related to consumer trust in that company.

Customers become fans of a company's SCW in order to gather product-related information from other customers (Hajli and Khani, 2013). Trust among customers may develop through their interactions over time. If a customer trusts other members in a SCW, he/she may make purchase decisions based on the opinions of other members (Shen, 2012). Identification-based trust may also enhance consumers' belief that the environment of the SCW is safe, and that all members there, including the company, are trustworthy. In addition, based on the trust transfer theory, trust in the members of a SCW may be expected to be transferable to its related sources, i.e., the company that set up the site (Ng, 2013):

*H2.* Identification-based trust in a company's SCW is positively related to consumer trust in that company.

### *3.2 Social commerce trust and eWOM intention*

Social commerce provides a platform for customers to obtain information related to products and services of a brand (Yadav *et al.*, 2013). Information-based trust represents customers' trust based on the information presented on a SCW. Brown *et al.* (2007) find that information credibility is an important foundation of one's eWOM in an online community. Jansen *et al.* (2009) also suggest that WOM communications in Twitter function on trusted sources of information. Therefore, we expect that if users perceive the information on a company's SCW to be trustworthy, they tend to be more likely to spread eWOM about that company:

*H3.* Information-based trust in a company's SCW is positively related to consumers' eWOM intention.

eWOM communication is found to be based on one's trust in others in social networks (Jansen *et al.*, 2009). In SCWs, customers' interpersonal trust is deeply embedded in their identification with others. Royo-Vela and Casamassima (2011) found that a high level of identification with others in a virtual brand community would develop more positive WOM behavior. Cheung and Lee (2012) also confirm that when people trust others and identify themselves as part of the community, they will be more willing to spread eWOM. In addition, a high level of identification-based trust will make customers believe that what others share in the web site is of good quality, and therefore they are willing to spread eWOM to connected friends (Li and Du, 2011). Therefore, we expect that identification-based trust in a SCW would motivate customers to spread eWOM:

*H4.* Identification-based trust in a company's SCW is positively related to consumers' eWOM intention.

### *3.3 Company trust and eWOM intention*

The relationship between customers' trust in a company and their eWOM intention toward the company's products has been well established in literature. For example, Ranaweera and Prabhu (2003) confirmed the positive relationship between trust and customers' WOM intention in traditional business environment. In the online context, Chu and Kim (2011) found that trust is one of the most important determinants of users' eWOM intention in SNS. In our study context, customers can develop their trust in a

company through interactions and engagement in its SCW. We expect that such trust would increase customers' confidence in recommending the company and its products to their connected friends:

*H5.* Consumer trust in a company is positively related to their eWOM intention.

#### *3.4 Prior experience and social commerce trust*

Previous studies have suggested that customers' prior experience is an important factor that determines their attitude and behavior in the online environment (Ling *et al.*, 2010). For example, Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) suggest that customers' previous experience with a company may contribute to their brand knowledge, and further influence customers relationships in the online brand community. In addition, prior transaction experience may impact customers' satisfaction with a company, and satisfaction is positively related to trust (Flavián *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, prior experience also affects individual trust propensity (Lee and Turban, 2001). For customers who have prior transaction experience with a company before they follow its brand page in the SCW, they may have already been able to evaluate certain qualities of the company. A rich transaction experience with a company may indicate a high level of loyalty toward the company before following its brand page. Such loyalty is expected to positively contribute to customers' trust development in the company's brand page in SCW:

*H6.* Consumers' prior experience with a company is positively related to information-based trust in a company's SCW.

*H7.* Consumers' prior experience with a company is positively related to identification-based trust in a company's SCW.

#### *3.5 Moderating effects of prior experience*

Customers' prior experience with a company contributes to their knowledge and expertise about this company. Many studies reveal a negative relationship between the amount of experience and the degree to which an individual depends on external information (Brucks, 1985). When evaluating the trustworthiness of a company, customers with less prior experience (i.e. lower level of expertise) with the company tend to depend heavily on trustworthy information (Sussman and Siegal, 2003). On the contrary, customers with more prior experience (i.e. higher level of expertise) would already have enough information to judge the trustworthiness of a company, and would thus depend less on external information (Cheung *et al.*, 2014). In similar vein, in our study, we believe that customers with more prior experience would have more confidence in their own judgment regarding the trustworthiness of a company, and they would thus rely less on information-based social commerce trust to form their company trust:

*H8.* Consumers' prior experience with a company negatively moderates the relationship between information-based social commerce trust and company trust.

On the other hand, studies also point out that knowledgeable consumers (with more prior experience) are generally less susceptible to interpersonal customer influences (Bearden *et al.*, 2001). Customer expertise is also found to moderate the influence of eWOM on customers' behavioral intention (Park and Kim, 2009). The study of Cheung *et al.* (2014) confirm that, when making judgments, consumers with higher level of expertise tend to rely more on their own knowledge and will be less likely to seek for others' opinion. In the SCW, we also believe that customers with more prior experience (i.e. higher level of expertise) would have more confidence in their own



judgments to form company trust. Consequently, for customers with more prior experience, the impact of identification-based social commerce trust on company trust will be weakened:

*H9.* Consumers' prior experience with a company negatively moderates the relationship between identification-based social commerce trust and company trust.

## 4. Research methodology

### 4.1 Research setting

There are many popular examples of SCWs, such as Facebook fan pages and Amazon online social networking stores (Liang and Turban, 2011). In this study, we focus on the brand page in Sina Microblog ([www.weibo.com](http://www.weibo.com)) as an example of the SCWs. The Sina Microblog is currently the most popular Microblog site in China with over 250 million registered users and more than 50,000 enterprise accounts (Zhang *et al.*, 2015). Many companies set up their own brand pages in Sina Microblog for online marketing and use them to promote their brands and engage with customers (Li and Shiu, 2012). Once a company has set up a brand page, Sina Microblog users can "follow" the brand page in order to receive most updated information and engage in discussions and interactions with other members in the brand page. We consider a company's brand page in Sina Microblog as a SCW as it includes the three most important attributes of social commerce: social media technologies, community interactions, and commercial activities (Liang and Turban, 2011). The brand page belongs to the second type of SCW which does not include direct transactions but aims at online marketing and communicating with customers (Ng, 2013).

### 4.2 Data collection

The potential respondents of this study are users who have "followed" at least one brand page on Sina Microblog. In Sina Microblog, brand pages are clustered into 23 categories according to industry type such as technology, hotel and tourism, food and beverage, and so on. The respondents were selected in the following manner. In each industry category, we first randomly selected five different brand pages, and then randomly selected 20 followers of each brand page to participate in an online survey. In this way, we obtained a total of 2,300 (i.e.  $23 \times 5 \times 20$ ) brand page followers. These brand page followers are treated as our potential participants. Our selection criteria guaranteed a wide diversity of brand pages and thus ensures our study has wide generalizability (Lee and Baskerville, 2003). We used a survey approach to collect data. We prepared our questionnaire using the online software "Qaultrics," and sent the online survey to the 2,300 potential participants. A screening question was used to confirm that the respondent was aware that he/she is actually a follower of the brand page. A prize draw was offered to encourage a higher response rate.

A total of 492 users participated in the survey, giving a response rate of 21 percent. After discarding questionnaires with incomplete information, 375 usable questionnaires were included in the analysis. Table II reports the detailed profile of respondents. Of the 375 respondents, 61.9 percent were female and 38.1 percent male. A majority (77.9 percent) were aged 18-28 and 62.4 percent held a bachelor's degree or above. The distribution of respondents is similar to the overall user distribution of brand pages in Sina Microblog according to a report by Sina Microblog in 2012 (SINA, 2012).

To further validate the representativeness of our sample, we assessed the potential problem of non-response bias. We divided our sample into two groups, that

Items	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Female	232 (61.9%)
	Male	143 (38.1%)
Age	< 18	5 (1.3%)
	18-28	282 (75.2%)
	29-38	65 (17.3%)
	> 38	23 (6.2%)
	Education level	Secondary and high school
	Diploma or relative course	75 (20.0%)
	Bachelor's degree	230 (61.3%)
	Master's degree or above	47 (12.6%)
Days using Microblog per week	0-1 day	69 (18.4%)
	2-3 days	60 (16.0%)
	4-5 days	68 (18.1%)
	6-7 days	178 (47.5%)
	Tenure of following the brand page	< 6 Months
	6 Months-1 Year	168 (44.8%)
	1-1.5 Years	78 (20.8%)
	> 1.5 Years	9 (2.4%)

**Table II.**  
Demographed data

is, early ( $n=247$ ) and late ( $n=128$ ) samples. We used  $t$ -test to compare the demographic attributes of these two samples, including gender, age, educational level, frequency of using Microblog, and number of followed brand pages. The results show that none of these attributes show significant differences at the 0.05 level. Therefore we concluded that there is no systematic non-response bias for our responding sample.

#### 4.3 Measures

We adopted established measurement items from previous studies to measure the constructs identified in this study. Company trust is specified as a second-order formative construct in this study. It is measured by integrity, competence, and benevolence adopted from McKnight *et al.* (2002). The wording of some items was modified to fit the research context. The Appendix presents details of the measurement items and their sources. We developed the primary version of questionnaire in English, and then we translated them into Chinese to facilitate respondents' understanding. We followed the approach of Bhalla and Lin (1987) to ensure validity by using the back-translation method. All the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Additionally, gender, age, brand page tenure, and number of followed brand pages are included as control variables.

#### 4.4 Common method bias (CMB)

As the data for independent and dependent variables (DV) are all self-reported and collected from a single source, CMB may be a concern in this study (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). We used Harman's one-factor test to statistically test the severity of CMB. The results revealed four factors with an eigenvalue above 1, with the first factor accounted for 36.48 percent of the total variance. Therefore, CMB is unlikely to be a serious concern in this study.

## 5. Results

This study adopted structural equation modeling tool Smart PLS 2.0 for data analysis to systematically examine the measurement and structural model. PLS is employed in this study because it makes minimal demands on sample size and normal distribution, and can be used for analyzing second-order formative constructs (Chin, 1998).

### 5.1 Assessment of the measurement model

To assess the properties of the measurement model, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis to exam the convergent and discriminant validity of the scales. The convergent validity was assessed using three criteria; all factor loadings should be greater than 0.7 (Chin, 1998); composite reliability (CR) should be above 0.7 (Chin, 1998); and average variance extracted (AVE) should be greater than 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). After deleting two items (i.e. IDBT4 and COM2) with factor loadings below 0.7 (0.60 and 0.69, respectively), the scale demonstrated high-convergent validity. Table III presents the results of this analysis. As shown in the table, all factor loadings are larger than 0.7, the CRs range from 0.87 to 0.95, and the AVEs range from 0.70 to 0.91. The discriminant validity of the measures was assessed by examining whether the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeds its correlation with other constructs in the model (Chin, 1998). As shown in Table IV, all constructs displayed adequate discriminant validity. Since some correlation values were higher than 0.6 criteria, multicollinearity may be a concern in this study. We further assessed the potential problem of multicollinearity using the variance inflation factor (VIF) test. A VIF value above 10 would indicate multicollinearity problem (Diamantopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001). Our statistical results showed that

Constructs	Items	Factor loading	CR	AVE
Information-based trust (INBT)	INBT1	0.91	0.92	0.80
	INBT2	0.92		
	INBT3	0.85		
	INBT4	0.82		
Identification-based trust (IDBT) <sup>a</sup>	IDBT1	0.84	0.89	0.72
	IDBT2	0.84		
	IDBT3	0.86		
Prior experience (PE)	PE1	0.83	0.87	0.70
	PE2	0.93		
	PE3	0.74		
Integrity (INT)	INT1	0.85	0.94	0.78
	INT2	0.90		
	INT3	0.90		
	INT4	0.89		
Competence (COM) <sup>a</sup>	COM1	0.95	0.95	0.91
	COM3	0.95		
Benevolence (BEN)	BEN1	0.87	0.90	0.74
	BEN2	0.87		
	BEN3	0.84		
Electronic word of mouth intention (eWOM)	eWOM1	0.92	0.95	0.87
	eWOM2	0.94		
	eWOM3	0.93		

**Note:** <sup>a</sup>IDBT4 and COM2 were deleted because of low factor loading (< 0.7)

**Table III.**  
Results of the  
convergent validity  
analysis

the VIF values for all independent variables (IV) ranged from 1.25 to 2.65, thus indicating that multicollinearity was not a serious concern in this study. Therefore, the measurement model was considered satisfactory with adequate validity and reliability, and was employed for structural model analysis.

5.2 Assessment of the second-order construct

As discussed earlier, this study proposes company trust as a second-order formative construct, which comprises three first-order formative constructs (integrity, competence, and benevolence). We followed procedural steps developed in previous studies (e.g. Luo *et al.*, 2010; Petter *et al.*, 2007; Polites *et al.*, 2011) to assess the validity of our second-order formative construct. First, from a conceptual point of view, the first-order constructs (integrity, competence, and benevolence) were measuring different facets of the second-order construct (company trust), and the direction of causality of second-order construct derives from its first-order constructs (McKnight *et al.*, 2002). This suggests that the first-order constructs are clearly distinct from each other and formatively measure the theoretical definition of the second-order construct. Second, we used three tests to statistically analyze the second-order formative construct. In test 1, we computed the correlations among first-order constructs, the result show that the absolute correlations among them are all below the cut-off value of 0.8 (Pavlou and El Sawy, 2006). In test 2, we tested the strength of the relationship between the second-order construct and its first-order factors. The results show that all the path coefficients from the first-order constructs to the second-order construct are significant at  $p < 0.01$ . In test 3, we assessed the possibility of multicollinearity for the first-order constructs using the VIF test. Our results reveal that VIF values for first-order constructs are below the cut-off value of 10 (range from 1.45 to 2.05). Above analyses jointly confirm the validity and reliability of the second-order formative construct.

5.3 Assessment of the structural model

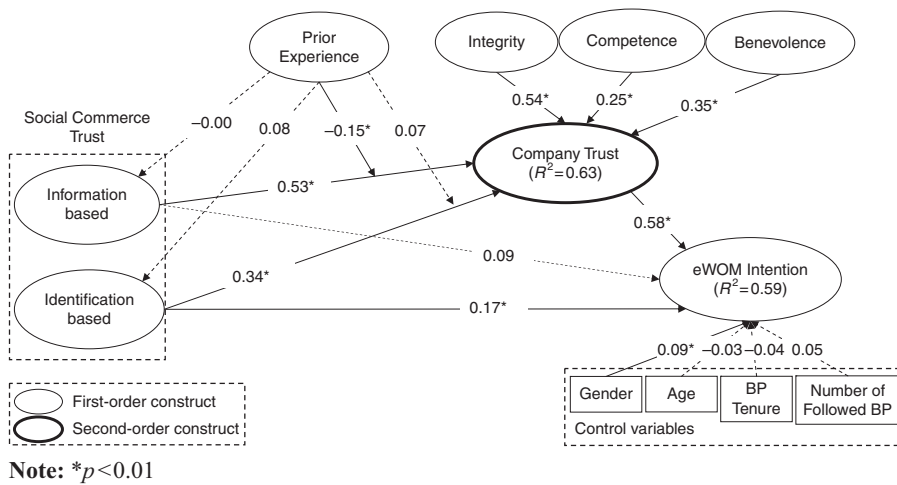
With the measurement model verified as described above, the proposed hypotheses were then tested using Smart PLS. Figure 2 depicts the results of the hypothesis testing of the structural model, including the standardized path coefficients and the variance explained ( $R^2$  value) of the DV.

The two factors of social commerce trust (information-based trust and identification-based trust) both significantly influence company trust at  $p < 0.001$  level ( $\beta = 0.54$  and  $0.35$ , respectively). Therefore  $H1$  and  $H2$  are supported. Among the impacts of social commerce trust factors on eWOM intention, the impact of identification-based trust is

**Table IV.**  
Mean, standard deviation, correlations of latent variables for the first-order constructs

Construct	Mean	SD	INBT	IDBT	PE	INT	COM	BEN	eWOM
INBT	3.77	0.85	0.89						
IDBT	3.46	0.91	0.52	0.85					
PE	3.00	0.74	0.00	-0.05	0.84				
INT	3.68	0.77	0.72	0.60	0.02	0.88			
COM	3.69	0.69	0.53	0.47	0.10	0.61	0.95		
BEN	3.49	0.79	0.57	0.54	0.12	0.71	0.56	0.86	
eWOM	3.73	0.84	0.60	0.56	0.13	0.71	0.57	0.63	0.93

**Note:** Diagonal elements are the square root of AVE for each construct and the off-diagonal elements are the correlations between constructs



**Figure 2.**  
Modelling results

significant at  $p < 0.01$  level ( $\beta = 0.14$ ), while the impact of information-based trust is not significant ( $\beta = 0.11$ ). Thus,  $H4$  is validated and  $H3$  is rejected. In addition, the relationship between company trust and eWOM intention is significant at  $p < 0.001$  level ( $\beta = 0.58$ ), suggesting that  $H5$  is supported. The direct effects of prior experience on information-based trust ( $\beta = -0.00$ ) and identification-based trust ( $\beta = 0.08$ ) are both not significant. Therefore  $H6$  and  $H7$  are not supported. The moderating effect of prior experience on the relationship between information-based trust and company trust is negatively significant ( $\beta = -0.15$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that  $H8$  is supported. However, the moderating effect of prior experience on the relationship between identification-based trust and company trust is not significant ( $\beta = 0.07$ ), thus rejecting  $H9$ . Among the four control variables, gender is the only variable that significantly influences eWOM intention ( $\beta = 0.09$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). The  $R^2$  values of company trust and eWOM intention are 0.63 and 0.59, respectively, indicating that the model provides a substantial explanation of the variance in customers' attitude and intention in this area.

#### 5.4 Mediating effects

In this section, we examine the mediating effect of company trust between social commerce trust and eWOM intention. We followed the testing procedure proposed by Preacher and Hayes (2008). In this test, we have three sets of variables. We treated information-based trust and identification-based trust as IV, company trust as presumed mediators (M), and eWOM as DV. We then computed the Sobel- $z$  scores (Sobel, 1982). Table V presents the results of the mediation analysis. As presented in

IV	M	DV	Sobel- $z$ ( $p$ -value)	IV $\rightarrow$ DV	
				In control of mediator	Mediation
Information-based trust	Company trust	eWOM	11.06 ( $p < 0.001$ )	0.12 ( $p < 0.05$ )	Partial
Identification-based trust	Company trust	eWOM	10.72 ( $p < 0.001$ )	0.15 ( $p < 0.01$ )	Partial

**Table V.**  
Sobel significance test results for indirect effects

this table, all Sobel- $z$  values are significant at  $p < 0.001$ , indicating company trust plays mediating roles between these respective IV and the DV. Column 5 reveals the path coefficient of the respective IV on DV in the control of mediator. A significant path value of column 5 implies that the respective mediator plays a partial mediating role between the independent and DV; otherwise, it serves a role of full mediation. Our results show that company trust plays a partial mediating role in both paths.

## 6. Discussion and implications

With the rapid development of SCWs, understanding user trust in this new context is one of most important and yet-to-be solved issues. This study has investigated the distinct role of social commerce trust, company trust, and eWOM intention in a nomological network. Results show that the two dimensions of social commerce trust (information-based and identification-based) can be transferrable to company trust, which in turn influences eWOM intention. This confirms that, customers generally perceive relatedness between the SCW and concerned companies. Therefore, in our study, customers' trust developed in certain brand pages in the SCW can be transferred to their trust in companies that host those brand pages. In addition, we found that the effects of information-based and identification-based trust on eWOM intention are partially mediated by company trust. It implies that company trust, as a mediating attitude, plays a significant role in predicting users' behavioral intentions in SCWs. In addition, identification-based trust in a brand page directly influences users' eWOM intention. This finding is consistent with previous studies arguing that eWOM communication depends largely on the connection and trust among people (Jansen *et al.*, 2009). However, contrary to our hypothesis, information-based trust in social commerce does not directly predict eWOM intention. One possible explanation may be that, since the brand pages usually post some other information besides brand promoting, users who trust in the information on a brand page may not necessarily develop trust to the products of the brand, thus they may not convey eWOM to others. Moreover, based on our results, trust in a company is a salient factor influencing eWOM intention. This finding is also consistent with many previous studies such as Palvia (2009) and Mukherjee and Nath (2007).

Furthermore, this study has considered customers' characteristics during trust development and transfer in SCWs. The results reveal that customers' prior transaction experience with a company does not contribute to their trust in the company's brand page in SCWs. This indicates that customers do not recognize the quality of a company's brand pages as exactly the same with the quality of a company. However, we found that customers' prior experience could moderate the trust transfer process from social commerce trust to company trust. That is, when customers have a rich prior experience with a company, they tend to depend lesser on information-based social commerce trust to form their company trust. This confirms that trust transfer process could be affected by certain conditional factors such as the trustor's characteristics. Nevertheless, our result shows that customers' prior experience does not negatively moderate the relationship between identification-based social commerce trust and company trust. One possible explanation could be that, customers who join SCWs usually tend to seek for communications with other users and they would normally value others' experiences and opinions. Therefore, based on the majority rule, although some of them may have rich prior experience, they would still seriously consider others' judgments regarding the trustworthiness of the company.

### 6.1 Implications for theory

This is one of the very few researches that provide a holistic overview of user trust in SCWs. This study contributes to theory by developing a trust-based model which provides new insight on users' eWOM in the context of brand pages in SCWs. Trust is a vital concept that has been discussed extensively by previous studies in different contexts. Given the rapid development and application of SCWs, this study is a response to the call for a deeper understanding of user trust in this research field.

Our results empirically demonstrated the significance of social commerce trust in building company trust and eWOM intention. In particular, this study indicated that users evaluate the trustworthiness of a SCW in two dimensions: information-based and identification-based. With reference to the prior development of information-based trust in different contexts (Kim and Han, 2009; Rahimnia and Hassanzadeh, 2013), this study advances the understanding of information-based trust by applying it in the new context of SCWs. In addition, since social connection and interaction are key features of SCWs, the understanding of interpersonal trust is of great significance in trust theory development in this area.

This study also confirms that trust transfer theory helps in explaining eWOM intention in SCWs. This finding is consistent with that of Ng (2013), whose study shows that users' trust in their close social networking community may be transferred to trust in the firms in the social networking community. Our study contributes to the trust transfer theory by applying it in the context of social commerce. This study serves as a basis for future study to explore more transference-based trust relations in social commerce.

This study also contributes to the trust transfer theory by considering the moderating effect of users' prior experience during the trust transfer process. Many prior studies apply the trust transfer theory without considering user attributes which could influence the process of trust transferring (e.g. Yang *et al.*, 2008). However, Akter *et al.* (2011) argues that trust is a context-dependent construct, which suggests that consider users' own experience would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how trust operates in a certain context. Therefore, by exploring the moderating effect of consumers' prior experience between social commerce trust and company trust, this study contributes to the theory development of trust transfer.

Furthermore, this study contributes to research on eWOM via SCWs. The distinct characteristics of SCWs are believed to substantially impact eWOM branding (Jansen *et al.*, 2009). This study explains the eWOM branding effect in SCW from a perspective of trust transfer, which contributes to the understanding of customers' eWOM behaviors in social networking context.

### 6.2 Implications for practice

SCWs are believed to have prominent features in driving value for both companies and users. Therefore, a better understanding of users' trust and its impacts on eWOM intentions may provide guidance for the design, development, and operation of brand pages in SCWs. Our study has proven that users' trust in the information and in the members of a SCW may result in a stronger sense of trust in related company, and may drive users' intention to spread eWOM to their connected friends. Therefore, managers of SCWs need to focus on improving the information trustworthiness, including the accuracy, validity, objectivity, and so on. It is also important to facilitate the mutual trust among members on the SCW (Hajli and Khani, 2013). For example, more discussions and activities could be organized to facilitate the opinion exchanges among users and thus proved a platform through which trust could be built.

Credibility could also be marked with customers who post high-quality information. In addition, since company trust is a key mediator between social commerce trust and eWOM intention, more brand promoting information could be posted on the SCW to improve user perceptions of the integrity, benevolence, and competence of the company. Moreover, our study found that when customers have a rich prior experience with the company, they tend to depend less on social commerce trust to form company trust. Accordingly, when facilitating company trust, managers of the brand page may focus on customers' level of prior experience. For customers with less prior experience, more resources should be provided to them in the SCW in order to develop their trust.

### *6.3 Limitations and future research directions*

This study has a number of limitations which may restrict the generalizability of the findings, and which could be addressed in future research. First, this study focusses only on users' trust perceptions as influencing factors of their eWOM intention in SCWs. Although the model explains 59 percent of the variance in eWOM intention, future studies should continue to enrich our understanding by adding further, relevant factors that may enhance the power of SCWs as a eWOM branding tool. Second, this study did not cover system factors of SCWs. Future research is encouraged to explore other factors related to social commerce systems such as operating environments (e.g. service reliability) and user-friendly interfaces. Third, customers may have already developed company trust before they follow a company's social web site, and such company trust could reversely influence social commerce trust. Although this study has controlled the effects for customers' prior experience on social commerce trust and trust transfer process, we did not directly measure customers' company trust before they follow the brand page in social commerce. Future studies could address this limitation by assessing how company trust impact on social commerce trust. Lastly, although there are various applications of SCWs worldwide, this study only focussed on the brand page in a Chinese Microblog site as an example. It may be of benefit to replicate the study in a different SCW and in different locations, and examine any differences in findings.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study is one of a very few emerging works to have empirically investigated user trust and its impacts on eWOM intention in social commerce context. This study has broadened the understanding of consumer trust in the SCW by specifying it as including information-based and identification-based trust. These two dimensions of social commerce trust better predicts users' trust in a company and eWOM intention in the social commerce context. We further applied the trust transfer theory to investigate how users' trust in a SCW may be transferred to their trust in a related company. The results support the proposed model and highlight the mediating role of company trust between social commerce trust and eWOM intention. In addition, we examined how customers' prior experience impacts social commerce trust development and trust transfer process. The results suggest that consumers' prior experience does not influence their trust development in the SCWs. However, consumers with a higher level of prior experience with a company tend to rely less on information-based social commerce trust to form their company trust. This study may serve as catalyst for research in social commerce, and provide a stepping-stone for deeper understanding in user attitudes and behaviors in the SCWs.



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#### Further reading

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(The Appendix follows overleaf.)

Constructs	Questionnaire items	Sources
Information-based trust (INBT)	INBT1: I think that the information offered by this brand page is sincere INBT2: I think that the information offered by this brand page is honest INBT3: This brand page does not make false statements INBT4: I think that the information offered by this brand page is trustworthy	(Lee, 2002)
Identification-based trust (IDBT)	IDBT1: I can talk freely to the members of this brand page about product-related issues IDBT2: If I share my problems with members on this brand page, I know they will respond constructively and caringly IDBT3: I know most members on this brand page will do everything within their capacity to help others IDBT4 <sup>a</sup> : I know most members on this brand page are honest	Hsu <i>et al.</i> (2007)
Prior experience (PE)	PE1: I have purchased a lot of products from this company before I follow its brand page PE2: I bought products frequently from this company before I follow its brand page PE3: I consider myself to be quite knowledgeable about this company before I follow its brand page	Bart <i>et al.</i> (2005)
Integrity (INT)	INT1: The company of this brand page is truthful in its dealings with me INT2: I would characterize the company of this brand page as honest INT3: The company of this brand page would keep its commitments INT4: The company of this brand page is sincere and genuine	McKnight <i>et al.</i> (2002)
Competence (COM)	COM1: The company of this brand page is competent and effective in providing service COM2 <sup>a</sup> : The company of this brand page performs its role of providing service very well COM3: Overall, the company of this brand page is a capable and proficient service provider	McKnight <i>et al.</i> (2002)
Benevolence (BEN)	BEN1: I believe that this company of the brand page would act in my best interest BEN2: If I required help, this company of the brand page would do its best to help me BEN3: This company of the brand page is interested in my well-being, not just its own	McKnight <i>et al.</i> (2002)
Electronic word of mouth intention (eWOM)	WOM1: I would like to introduce the company of this brand page to others WOM2: I would like to recommend the company of this brand page to others WOM3: I would like to say positive words about the company of this brand page to others	Kim <i>et al.</i> (2008)

**Table A1.**

Measurement items

**Note:** <sup>a</sup>Items deleted for low factor loading

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