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Social Media Influencers: Talk is Not Cheap!

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ABSTRACT

Social media influencers are digital opinion leaders who have amassed large followings on social media. Through their content and communication on social commerce platforms, and social networking sites, social media influencers can influence their audience's attitude towards brands and encourage purchase decisions. This paper explores the impact of social media influencers on the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention. Since the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention has been thoroughly examined by researchers, I discover through reviewing the literature how an independent entity can impact social media consumers' attitudes and purchase decisions. Specifically, I analyze the social commerce construct and develop propositions related to the relationships between the dimensions of social commerce and the social media influencer construct.

Keywords: *Social media influencers, social media, social commerce, purchase intention, source attractiveness theory, source credibility model, technology acceptance theory, unified theory of acceptance.*

INTRODUCTION

Influencers have been around for centuries, and their power is far from new. Information communications technologies (ICT) and Web 2.0 facilitated the rise of modern-day influencers, social media influencers. Social media influencers, often called endorsers, content creators, and brand advocates, represent an authentic type of independent or self-reliant "third party endorser" (Freberg et al., 2011). They produce and provide information to their audiences, share their thoughts on brands and brand experiences, and make suggestions that help shape consumer purchase decisions.

Social media influencers, by definition, influence on social media. Since social media influencers are considered "content providers" who have dedicated audiences on various social media platforms through their development and publishing of content, they communicate delight or disdain about brands and influence their audiences to make brand-related decisions (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014). Due to the social media influencer ability to inspire consumers on social media to make brand-related decisions, executives at top companies actively seek ways to forge social media influencer partnerships with the expectation that influencers will impact the bottom line (Gaines-Ross, 2003). Through social media influencers, whose power and audience are only active on social networking sites, executives invest in expanding social media reach beyond paid advertising and organic content and fostering more authentic relationships with consumers.

Brand credibility can be established through social media influencers' shared thoughts and recommendations.

Social commerce also relies on ICT and Web 2.0 to drive conversations on social networking sites—conversations on social commerce platforms fuel opportunities for social media influence and brand interactivity with everyday users. Social commerce is a type of e-commerce, or electronic commerce, that utilizes social media platforms, such as Facebook, to conduct transactions and communicate with buyers and potential buyers. (Zhang, 2012). Thus, e-commerce merges with social networking sites to cater to growing demand across media platforms (Kim and Srivastava, 2007). Through social commerce, current and potential customers have access to knowledge reserves that might better inform their purchase decision-making (Dennison et al., 2009). While this access is most appealing to consumers, it is also an opportunity for businesses to understand and curate brand benefits and messaging to address the valid concerns and needs of the consumer market (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). Social commerce represents an opportunity for brands to shape their online strategy to evolve with the changing landscape of digital technology on social media and SNSs.

In this paper, I present a conceptual framework that supports the impact of social media influencers on social commerce and purchase intention. Next, I provide social commerce dimensions that operationalize activity on social networking platforms. Then, I explain the dynamics of social media influencers; that is, what and how of social media influencers and the power of their influence on social media. These social influence dynamics illustrate how credibility is developed and why social media influencers are attractive to consumers and brands seeking social media influence support. Finally, I will present a series of propositions that support a conceptual framework. The framework will demonstrate social media influencers' positive impact on the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention, connecting elements of social media influencers with the social commerce construct. I conclude with further research suggestions.

Social Media Influencers and Their Impact: Conceptual Framework

Though social commerce is considered well-established, an in-depth study of the literature can help clarify the dimensions of social commerce and how the larger construct, social commerce, can lead to purchase intention (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). A clearer definition of social commerce is "the delivery of e-commerce activities and transactions via the social media environment, mostly in social networks and by using Web 2.0 software. Thus, social commerce is a subset of e-commerce that involves using social media to assist in e-commerce transactions and activities" (Liang & Turban, 2011, p. 6). Though an extension of e-commerce, social commerce happens at the cross-section of e-commerce and social media or social networking sites, like Facebook. Activities included in social commerce include conversations among users on social networking sites. These users are sometimes called "actors" and can include institutions, companies and brands, customers and potential customers, and organizations (Liang & Turban, 2011). Social commerce includes purchase potential, or the capability of users on social networking sites to purchase products, including individual profiles, conversations in the form of information exchange between individuals and community (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013).

With the overarching layers of social commerce, there are two social commerce dimensions. The first social commerce dimension includes ratings and reviews, recommendations and referrals, and forums and communities. The second social commerce dimension includes informativeness, interactivity, and performance expectancy.
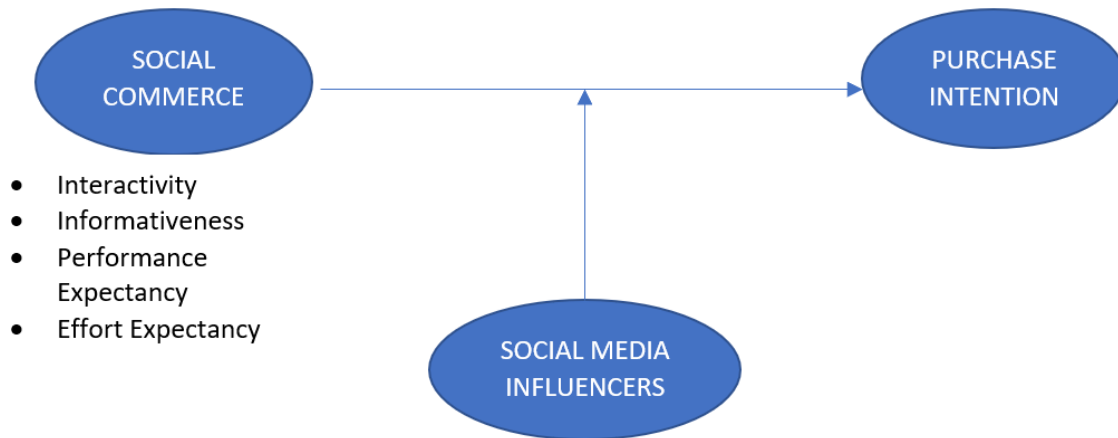

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Social media influencers are growing in demand. Their demand can be to some degree, if not most likely, attributed to their large followership or social media audiences (Grave, 2019). They are considered "opinion leaders" who communicate with many unknown people (Grave, 2017). Social media influencers typically span major social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter. These social media "celebrities" effectively communicate value to their audiences and, whether through a paid promotion or personal endeavor, convince dedicated followers to make a purchase decision for specific products. It is because of this recognition that businesses often "enter into paid collaborations with SMI (social media influencers) for advertising or product placement purposes" (Grave, 2019, p. 1). Since their audiences live on social media platforms, the avenue by which social commerce takes place, social media influencers communicate with current and potential customers. Social media influencers have a more credible voice in the eyes of dedicated followers or social media users who believe large followings indicate credibility. The relationship between social commerce, electronic commerce on social media, and purchase intention has been studied profusely by academics seeking ways to bridge the gap between industry and academia. What has not been studied as extensively is the impact of social media influencers on the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention. More directly, do social media influencers positively impact this relationship?

Since social media influencers are considered opinion leaders across social media platforms, including social commerce, how are they persuasive? How can they take on the label of opinion leaders, and why are businesses so confident enough to establish paid collaborations with social media influencers? Four theories support developing propositions for the impact of social media influencers on the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention. I will discuss

four identified theories that directly support the effectiveness of social commerce, social media influencers in communicating value, and purchase intention on social media.

Technology Acceptance Model

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM; Davis, 1989) "was developed to explain computer usage behaviors" (Chukwere, 2021, p. 3). Computer usage behaviors include purchase intention. The model further explains two concepts, one of which was mentioned when discussing performance expectancy and the other includes perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. In essence, the impact of social media influencers on the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention hinges on consumers' perception that social commerce is both valuable and is easy to use.

Social media influencers can intersect this dynamic by helping people communicate via social commerce to make purchase decisions. TAM indicates that consumers on social commerce platforms, social media, or social networking sites believe social commerce helps them purchase products (Davis, 1989). Davis (1989) wrote the article when social commerce, social media, social media platforms, and social networking sites did not yet exist. Instead, Davis used "virtual" to indicate online or internet activities.

Unified Theory of Acceptance

Unified Theory of Acceptance identifies three factors that determine behavioral intention or purchase intention (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The three factors are performance expectancy, effort expectancy, and social influence. *Performance expectancy*, in the context of social commerce, refers to whether or not social media users believe that interacting through ratings and reviews, recommendations and referrals, and forums and communities will help them make the best purchase decision. In this case, social commerce is the platform that will provide social media users with ease of use in extracting necessary information to make a purchase decision. *Effort expectancy* speaks to how easy it would be for social media users to extract information via social commerce to make a purchase decision. Effort expectancy does not pertain to whether or not these social media users believe social commerce will help them perform better or make better decisions.

Social influence, the final factor of Unified Theory of Acceptance, directly converges with the impact of other social media users who communicate with one another and the impact of social media influencers. Social influence dictates whether social media users think others on social commerce platforms believe they should or should not make a purchase decision. Social media influencers, and their impact on the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention, effortlessly connects with all three factors of the Unified Theory of Acceptance. Based on the literature, there is an indication that social media influencers strengthen the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention by convincing social media users should purchase products.

Source Credibility Model

Social media influencers hold an incredible amount of power in the eyes of their followers. More often than not, these dedicated followers are willing to make purchase decisions based on the opinion of social media influencers. One underpinning theory behind this phenomenon is the social credibility model. With this theory proposed by Hovland & Weiss' (1951), I can effectively apply the effectiveness of information exchanged between the social media influencer and their following depending on the follower's attitude toward the social media influencer. Social media influencers are considered experts by the audience on social media, whether or not they are actual experts. Social media influencers' perceived trustworthiness is likely why they are positioned as opinion leaders to their social media audience. Hovland & Weiss (1951) highlight two factors of source credibility, that of expertness and trustworthiness. Social media influencers are more trustworthy by building audiences (Jin et al., 2019) and these influencers possess expertness and trustworthiness that likely leads their audience to purchase decisions.

Whitehead (1968) provides that social media influencers can encourage their audiences to make purchase decisions. Whitehead's four dimensions categorize source credibility. They are trustworthiness, competence, dynamism, and objectivity. Dimension I covers one of the two factors presented by Hovland & Weiss, trustworthiness. Social media influencers are perceived as trustworthy; therefore, communication with social media users on social commerce platforms is seen as credible (Smith et al., 2006; Dean and Biswas, 2001).

Source Attractiveness Model

Source attractiveness encompasses credibility and hinges on social media influencers' communication effectiveness. A prior paper by Joseph (1982) discussed how the communicator is more likely to positively impact consumer attitudes about specific products. Communicators represent social media influencers to the extent that they can positively impact consumer attitudes. Considering how several social media influencers are conventionally attractive and have amassed a large following because of their attractiveness (e.g., Kim Kardashian), they are more likely to encourage higher purchase intentions (Van de Sompel & Vermeir, 2016).

SOCIAL COMMERCE

The dimensions of social commerce provide how social networking site users exchange information and interact. Also, it performs as expected for social media users and satisfies the level of effort needed to fulfill their intended use. One dimension of social commerce dimension includes ratings and reviews, recommendations and referrals, and forums and communities according to the literature.

Ratings and Reviews

Ratings and reviews are essential to the construction of social commerce and help customers determine whether or not they will subscribe to, purchase, or support a business or brand. Since these ratings and reviews can be quickly, and with little effort, published online via social networking sites, information is exchanged almost immediately (Chen, Xu, & Whinston, 2011).

Within ratings and reviews from third-party sources are information and insights about customer experiences with brands and the products (Yubo & Jinhong, 2005). Ultimately, the benefit of such exchange of information and insights assist potential customers in their purchase decision. Engagement of users on social networking sites through the ratings and reviews provides a level of empowerment. Social influencers engage in this type of social informativeness and interaction by providing their reviews, and rating products they believe are worthy of a purchase.

Recommendations and Referrals

While similar to ratings and reviews, recommendations and referrals are typically provided with the added element of suggestions and advice. The two sets of dimensions often converge since users can both provide a recommendation or referral and rating and review simultaneously. However, social networking sites like Facebook have two distinct areas where platform users can provide recommendations rather than ratings. Users are given the option between the two, furthering the idea that, though the two sets of dimensions overlap, they are distinct categories within social commerce. The impossibility of customers experiencing certain products online or on social media might be why they are more likely to rely on and search out recommendations (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). Recommendations and referrals are necessary for current and potential users to provide information, interact, and suggest whether a product can perform as expected. Although an element of co-creation occurs between social media influencers and firms, people online are more likely to believe a recommendation or referral from someone who is not a direct representative of the company selling its products (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Forums and Communities

Forums and communities are environments where social media users can interact and share information. For example, Facebook has what is known as Groups, where its users can interact with other group members and form distinct communities of like-minded individuals. Since these members share a common interest, they are more likely to be influenced by other members' advice, recommendations, or ratings. Using the same example, these members within Facebook Groups can participate in certain activities; one trending activity is called a "challenge" (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). In the process of participating in activities and interacting, information is shared. Social media influencers are not excluded from these groups or forums and communities by same-level access across social networking sites to users. These users or members are credible since they have more significant and more pronounced followings than the average social media user or group member. Therefore, their word-of-mouth recommendation is equally credible based on their following (Park et al., 2007).

Ratings and reviews, recommendations and referrals, and forums and communities are how information is shared, interactivity happens, and social media users demonstrate performance expectancy. Moreover, informativeness, interactivity, performance expectancy, and effort expectancy are social commerce dimensions substantiate ratings and reviews, recommendations and referrals, and forums and communities.

The second dimension of social commerce includes informativeness, interactivity, performance expectancy, and effort expectancy. All of which helps explain the relationship between social commerce and purchase intent.

Informativeness

Knowledge management literature dictates how crucial sharing information is on social networking sites. Studies indicate the influence of knowledge, due to shared information, on social networking sites in driving transactions. Since social commerce involves electronic commerce, informativeness happens where users meet and can directly lead to purchases (considering the purchase element of "commerce"). In the context of social commerce, informativeness happens within communities through user recommendations and referrals and ratings and reviews (Liu et al., 2016). The matter of trust is considered when measuring whether information via social commerce is related to purchase intent. These social media users share information about products, services, and brands to encourage action on social networking sites. The level of informativeness through social commerce, and its actors, significantly impacts purchase decisions. To this end, the literature indicates that information shared online can provide the impetus to purchase (Li et al., 2012).

Interactivity

The main characteristic of social commerce is the interaction between users, institutions, companies, and organizations. Interactivity is embedded in the structure and purpose of social media and social commerce. Literature supports a relationship between social commerce and purchase intention, and social media influencers, interactivity, and interaction are interchangeable (Han, 2014). Interactivity "can be categorized based on the feature, perception, and process approaches" (McMillan & Hwang, 2002, p. 30) and highlights how, due to Web 2.0 technologies and ICT, "human-to-computer communications" are possible (McMillan & Downes, 2000). In this sense, social media users interact with one another to connect their interests and enable information sharing. Social media influencers join the interaction by providing content about a particular product and exchanging insights with followers and other users who are not necessarily following the social media influencer. These users, including influencers, interact via recommendations, reviews, and communities since platforms like Facebook allow a two- or multi-way of communication. Through interactivity, sharing insights and information, potential customers may be encouraged to make a purchase decision. The social media influencer might strengthen this relationship between interactivity via social commerce and purchase intent.

Performance Expectancy

Information sharing via social commerce is the driving force for discussion around performance expectancy. As consumers interact through ratings and reviews, recommendations and referrals, and forums and communities, information about product performance is bound to be shared. Naturally, if a product, according to consumers on the social commerce platform, does not perform according to a certain level of expectancy, people who have interacted with these

consumers are less likely to purchase that specific product (Chang et al., 2015). In this case, a system represents a product that may or may not be purchased by those who need to be more productive in their work, and the posits that performance expectancy is tied to usefulness. Alalwan (2018) hypothesized that performance expectancy, indirectly presented in social commerce, is positively related to purchase intention. Thus, the role of social media influencers in persuading consumers to make a purchase decision based on the conveyance of performance expectancy content is impactful.

Effort Expectancy

Effort expectancy is a Unified Theory of Acceptance construct and converges with performance expectancy. Venkatesh et al. (2003) hypothesized that effort expectancy is determined by an information systems' ease of use. Onaolapo and Oyewole (2018, p. 98) summarized Ghalandari (2012) by stating that "effort expectancy is based on the idea that there are relationships between the effort put forth at work, the performance achieved from that effort, and the rewards received from the effort." Social commerce provides social media users with the platform to easily exchange information and make purchase decisions. In comparison to ease of use, effort expectancy is likely enhanced when social media influencers are active on social commerce platforms and can help provide a more credible answer to product purchase-related questions. The question arises, how much effort does it take to get the information needed in order to purchase via social commerce? With one barrier eliminated by social commerce, which is the ability to make product purchases directly from social media platforms, the impact of social media influencers in information sharing likely helps social media users feel more confident about their purchase decision.

CONNECTING SOURCE CREDIBILITY MODEL DIMENSIONS TO SOCIAL COMMERCE

The dimensions of the source credibility model likely correlate with the social commerce construct. Based on the literature, social commerce corresponds to the source credibility model dimensions in a way that likely demonstrates the positive impact on the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention. Social commerce is categorized by two dimensions that connect to the initiatives of social media influencers on social commerce platforms. The first dimension includes ratings and reviews, recommendations and referrals, and forums and communities. The second dimension includes informativeness, interactivity, performance expectancy, and effort expectancy.

The Connectedness of Direct Effects within Construct

The direct effects of social commerce include informativeness, interactivity, performance expectancy, and effort expectancy. These effects likely drive purchase decisions for social media users. Thus, the first proposition is offered:

P1: Social commerce is positively related to purchase intention given its informativeness, interactivity, performance expectancy, and effort expectancy for social media users.

When social media users engage through ratings and reviews, recommendations and referrals, and forums and communities, they share information and interact with one another to affirm or make a purchase decision. Also, these social media users have expectations of social commerce and its inherent abilities. They expect social commerce to perform in a way that will help them attain their goal; concurrently, social media users perceive social commerce as an easier way to attain the information they need to make purchase decisions. Social commerce, and its direct effects, likely correspond to social media influencers' effects to strengthen social media users' ability to make a purchase decision. Therefore,

P2: Social media influencers positively impact the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention such that social media influencers strengthen the relationship between the two constructs.

Further, the direct effects of social media influencers likely have varying impacts on social media influencers' abilities to strengthen the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention. As illustrated by Figure 2, this leads to the following:

P2a: Trustworthiness of social media influencers positively impacts the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention.

P2b: Objectivity of social media influencers positively impacts the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention.

P2c: Competence of social media influencers positively impacts the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention.

P2d: Dynamism of social media influencers positively impacts the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention.

P2e: Attractiveness of social media influencers positively impacts the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention.
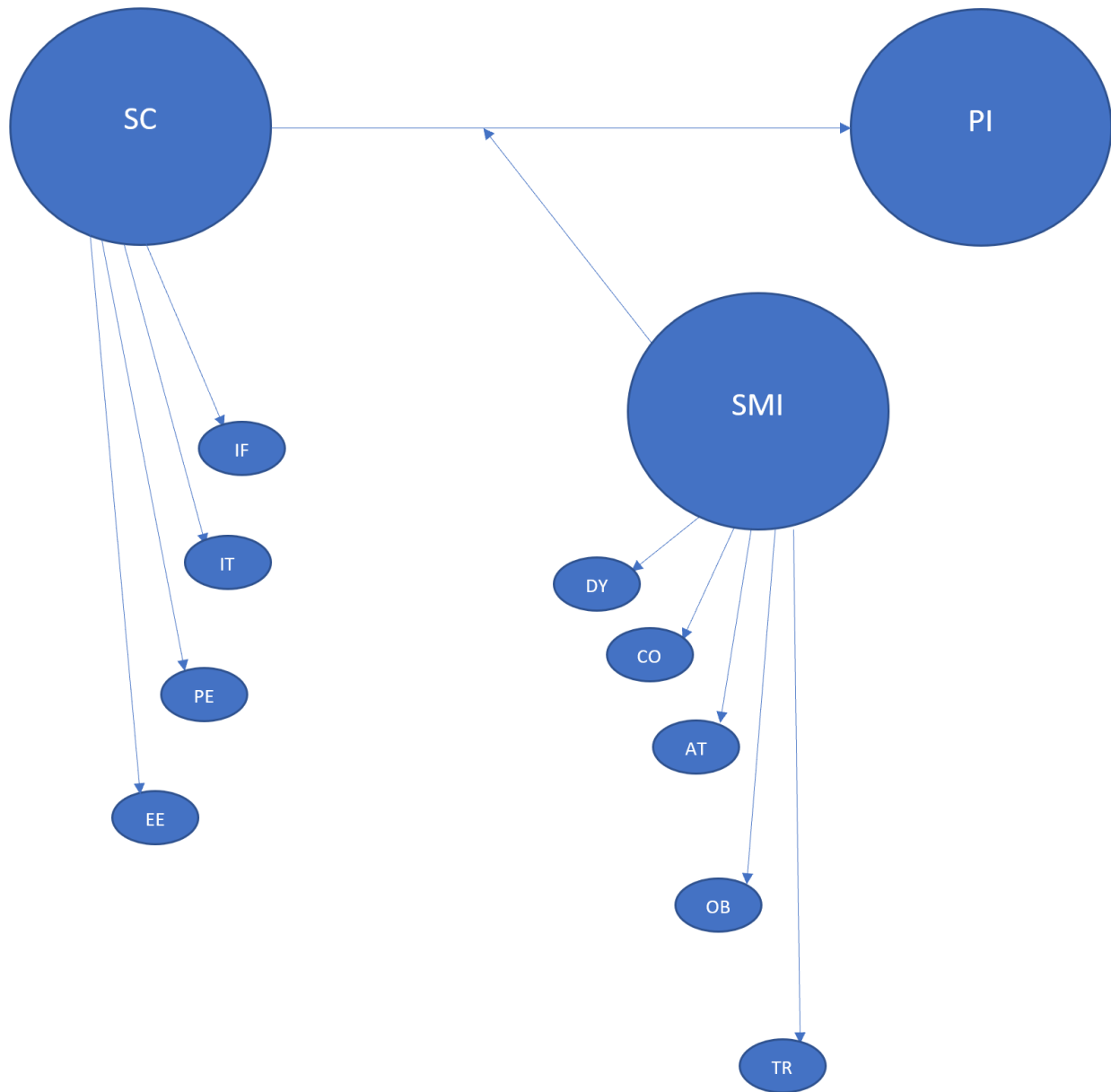
Figure 2. Detailed Conceptual Model

Social commerce direct effects, informativeness (IF), interactivity (IT), performance expectancy (PE), and effort expectancy (EE) likely correspond to social media influencer direct effects. Social media influencer direct effects, derived from the source credibility and source attractiveness model, include dynamism (DY), competence (CO), trustworthiness (TR), objectivity (OB), and attractiveness (AT). Figure 2 illustrates possible relationships between the two sets of direct effects.

CONCLUSION

Social media influencers are a relevant and resourceful group of digital opinion leaders who impact purchase decisions. Their credibility and attractiveness rest on their large social media audiences. What makes social media influencers credible is their perceived objectivity, though some bias likely exists within brand partnerships, trustworthiness, social dynamism, competence, and level of work to build out content around brand benefits and attractiveness. Social media influencers can interact and exchange information with users on social commerce platforms. Social commerce, derived from electronic commerce, has been studied extensively over the last 15 years, yet researchers have yet to establish a definitive definition (Curty and Zhang, 2011; Liang and Turban, 2011; Kim, 2013; Wang and Zhang, 2012; Zhou et al., 2013; Dar and Shah, 2013; Hajli, 2013). Researchers have connected social commerce with purchase intention (Hajli, Sims, Zadeh, and Richard, 2017; Sohn and Kim, 2020; Sun, Shao, Li, Guo, and Nie, 2019; Zhao, Huang, and Su, 2019; Al-Adwan, 2018). The social commerce construct is comprised of informativeness, interactivity, performance expectancy, and effort expectancy. Social commerce is a platform where social media influencers can impact purchase decisions by communicating with users.

The impact of social media influencers on the relationship between social commerce and purchase intention has not been thoroughly examined. Identifying which social commerce dimensions might demonstrate a relationship with which social media influencer construct, any number of source credibility dimensions, is an area of opportunity for future research. For instance, informativeness within the social commerce construct might be directly related to the competence dimension of the social media influencer construct.

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