**The Study of Social Commerce in Generation Z Context: The Role of Social Support and Privacy Risk**

The recent proliferation of social media platforms has witnessed a growth in social commerce by using social media to facilitate interactivity between customers and vendors. While emergent studies on social commerce are growing, their focus tends to be on millennials and cross-age groups. Given the growth of digital natives in shaping the online shopping experience of the future, we deemed an application to Generation Z necessary and overdue.

Design/methodology/approach – We draw on the existing literature and develop a framework to understand social commerce dynamics for digital natives. We employ PLS and CB-SEM to test our proposed model.

Findings – Our findings demonstrate the importance of social commerce information sharing activities in facilitating social support, a sense of warmth and belongingness, and online trust for Generation Z platform users. We also investigate the roles of online trust and perceived risk on intention to purchase and find support for both relationships. Finally, we discuss the findings in terms of theoretical and managerial contributions and conclude the study with limitations and future research directions.

Originality/value – This research is unique by using social commerce theory to explore Gen Z platform users. The finding will contribute to information system literature by expanding the social commerce research stream.

Keywords Social commerce, Social support, Information sharing, Trust, Perceived risk, Generation Z

Introduction

In comparison to e-commerce, favoured by millennials, online consumption by digital natives, or Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012), is characterised by social commerce ([Kastenholz,](#_bookmark55)gies ([Lin *et al.*, 2017](#_bookmark65)). Specifically, it refers to the dynamic nature of online sharing of knowledge, experiences, and information, “providing a supportive environment in an online context” ([Hajli, 2014](#_bookmark40), p. 17). Therefore, while the focus of e-commerce traditionally has been on one-to-one interactions to create value, s-commerce seeks to understand the dynamics embedded within online communities and their conversations ([Hajli](#_bookmark47) *[et al.](#_bookmark47)*[, 2017](#_bookmark47); [Huang and Benyoucef, 2013](#_bookmark50)). The behavioural shift from e—to s-commerce is reflected in the growth of social networking sites (SNS), such as YouTube and Facebook, and more recently,

 TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest. Such SNSs provide platforms for empowering customers, with almost unlimited scope for consumer generated content (CGC), and, consequently, a new wave of consumer-provider knowledge management platforms. Indeed, the highest usage of this new wave of s-commerce enabling SNSs is Gen Z ([Fromm, 2022](#_bookmark34); [Kastenholz, 2021](#_bookmark55)). Since Gen Z more readily share their knowledge, experiences, and information during s-commerce, they have become an integral part of the value creation process through the social support they provide to each other during online interactions. Despite the importance of Gen Z in s-commerce, our knowledge of the dynamics of social support, which characterises their interactions, remains limited.

While social support’s function in enhancing online s-commerce and trust (e.g. [Hajli *et al.*,](#_bookmark47) [2017](#_bookmark47)) has previously validated, what role, if any, it plays in facilitating Gen Z’s online decision- making remains unexplored. Although the importance of s-commerce for Gen Z is widely recognised ([Kastenholz, 2021](#_bookmark55)), there remains a paucity of research focusing on Gen Z’s interaction with new-age technologies and the developmental psychology aspects of this process ([Priporas](#_bookmark84) *[et al](#_bookmark84)*[., 2017](#_bookmark84); [Duffett, 2017](#_bookmark30); [Kesharwani, 2020](#_bookmark56)). This is further surprising given the proliferation of s-commerce is intrinsically tied to the growth of Gen Z ([Kastenholz, 2021](#_bookmark55)), and moreover, the future of online shopping likely to be most shaped by this generation. Compounding this urgency further are growing concerns about the psychological vulnerabilities of Gen Z. Gen Z report higher rates of anxiety, depression, and distress than other age groups ([Mojtabai and Olfson, 2020](#_bookmark71); [Coe *et al*., 2022](#_bookmark25)). A survey by the American Psychological Association ([Bethune, 2019](#_bookmark16)), for instance, found 45% of Gen Z report very good or excellent mental health, compared to 56% Millennials and 74% older adults, and yet Gen Z is the least likely to seek social support ([Coe *et al*., 2022](#_bookmark25)). Furthermore, Gen Z also shows a higher level of concern, uncertainty, and stress from SNSs than other generations ([Portell, 2021](#_bookmark83)).

Therefore, the guiding research question of our study is: *What role do social support and privacy concerns have on Gen Z*’*s online purchase behaviours?* In investigating the role of social support and privacy concerns in Gen Z’s s-commerce based purchase decisions, we make several contributions to the existing literature.

First, and although studies have recognised how Gen Z may engage in online self- disclosure activities to compensate for loneliness and low self-esteem (e.g. [Gentina and Chen,](#_bookmark39) [2019](#_bookmark39)), we know less about how social support functions to facilitate social trust and drive Gen Z’s purchase activities. Identifying and isolating the effects of different forms of social support available to Gen Z may serve as an essential tool to leverage Gen Z towards a more trusting s-commerce experience and thus facilitate decision-making. Therefore, while social support has been documented as a key antecedent of online trust and purchase decision- making, its role in leveraging the same for Gen Z remains unexplored. Given the heightened need for coping strategies in Gen Z to manage loneliness ([Gentina and Chen, 2019](#_bookmark39)) and low self-esteem ([Chaplin *et al*., 2014](#_bookmark21)), we would anticipate social support to provide an important ameliorating role in fostering greater communal trust and consequently in facilitating decision-making.

Second, and underpinning social support and social trust, the role of social information sharing activities, such as user-generated reviews and recommendations, also remains unexplored in Gen Z enabled s-commerce contexts. Yet, the proliferation of these in SNSs has witnessed exponential growth.

Third, given that Gen Z tend to be more risk-averse in attitudes and behaviours and further compounded by rising concerns of online risk, exploring the role of personal risk on Gen Z’s purchase intention is also warranted ([Pavao and Khalil, 2019](#_bookmark77)). While the effects of individual risk on online purchase intentions have been investigated extensively in other age groups (e.g. [Liao *et al*., 2011](#_bookmark64); [Wang and Herrando, 2019](#_bookmark105)), less is known about the impact of personal risk on purchase intentions for Gen Z. Personal risk has however become an important policy concern in examining the nexus between Gen Z and SNSs ([Jozani](#_bookmark53) *[et al](#_bookmark53)*[., 2020](#_bookmark53)).

The structure of our study is as follows. We first contextualise the nexus between Gen Z and social commerce. Subsequently, we discuss the importance of social support and relevant concepts. Then, based on social support theory, we discuss our hypotheses and introduce our

research model. We then describe our method in detailed and follow with an explanation of the findings. We discuss our findings before concluding with theoretical and practical implications.

Literature review

*Generation Z and social commerce* Gen Z, or those typically born after 1995 ([Sparks and Honey, 2014](#_bookmark97); [Seemiller and Grace, 2018](#_bookmark92)), are regarded as the first digitally native generation (hence their interchangeable usage in this study). As [Kastenholz (2021)](#_bookmark55) explains, since they are the “first generation that is active and available for almost 24 h a day” they have never known a time when ordering food online, messaging friends, or Facetiming their family was not possible. The defining consensus on Gen Z is that they were born in an age of online devices and therefore have no or little memory of a world “as it existed without smartphones” ([Parker and Igielnik, 2020](#_bookmark76)). Not surprisingly, for Gen Z, the distinction between offline and online is blurry. One can seamlessly shift between the two, and therefore their identities are intrinsically tied to the digital ([Seemiller](#_bookmark92) [and Grace, 2018](#_bookmark92)). The most obvious implication of this digitalisation is the increased amount of screen time spent by Gen Z and its implications.

[Twenge’s (2017)](#_bookmark103) comprehensive inter-generational psychographics research, covering a sample of seven million teenagers across the States, points to a paradoxical picture of Gen Z. While they are relatively more confident, assertive, and inclusive, they are also “more miserable than ever before” and may “be on the brink of the worst mental health crisis in decades” ([Twenge’s, 2017](#_bookmark103). p. 3). Others have reported lower levels of self-esteem ([Chaplin](#_bookmark21) [*et al*., 2014](#_bookmark21)) and heightened loneliness ([Gentina and Chen, 2019](#_bookmark39)) in Gen Z. [Twenge (2017)](#_bookmark103) attributes this mental health crisis to increased smartphone usage leading to reduced “in- person social interaction” (p. 112) and therefore limited social support. Others have also raised caution between greater screen time and mental health indicators.

Spending more time on Facebook has, for instance, been linked to significant depressive symptoms ([Steers *et al*., 2014](#_bookmark98)) and has also been correlated negatively with mood ([Sagiogloo](#_bookmark89) [and Greitemeyer, 2014](#_bookmark89)). [Moeller *et al.* (2012)](#_bookmark70) global experiment, spanning 1000 students across five continents, found when students were asked to give up all media, including texting; they exhibited classic addiction withdrawal symptoms such as craving and anxiety. Several other studies (e.g. [Caplan, 2007](#_bookmark19); [Beard, 2005](#_bookmark15)) have described “Internet addiction” as similar to pathological addiction, with symptoms including, but not limited to “to preoccupation with the Internet, the need to use the Internet with increasing amounts of time to achieve satisfaction, an inability to cut back Internet use, depressed, or irritable mood when attempting to cut back Internet use, longer use of the Internet than intended, and use of the Internet to escape from problems” ([Lister-Landman *et al*., 2017](#_bookmark67), p. 2).

COVID-19 has compounded the mental health vulnerability of Gen Z ([Parker and Igielnik,](#_bookmark76) [2020](#_bookmark76)). Since the pandemic, 58% of Gen Z report two or more unmet social needs, such as health, education, jobs, travel, etc. compared to 16% for older generations ([Coe *et al*., 2022](#_bookmark25)).

Exasperating this problem yet further is the reluctance of Gen Z to seek social support, leading [Coe *et al*. (2022](#_bookmark25), p. 6) to conclude that it is “crucial to employ a user-centred design approach to develop functionality and experiences that Gen Zers actually want”. Since social support has a direct effect on mediating stress in relationships ([Cobb, 1976](#_bookmark24)), it is also considered central in ensuring user-centred s-commerce ([Shin, 2013](#_bookmark95)). Industry reports also frequently report a sense of inclusiveness and belongingness, or social support, as key needs for Gen Z’s online retailing experience ([Francis and Hoefel, 2018](#_bookmark33); [Noel, 2020](#_bookmark73)). While these

 dynamics have been studied for older generations and predominantly within e-commerce contexts, scholarly attention on social support dynamics for Gen Z enabled s-commerce is lacking.

Therefore, based on the discussion above, social support is important to facilitate Gen Z to maintain mental health and gain trust in s-commerce transactions. Next, we clearly describe our theoretical foundation of social support theory to better understand the critical role of social support in s-commerce.

*Social support and social commerce*

Social support theory has a rich historical trajectory in social psychology (e.g. [Cobb, 1976](#_bookmark24); [Barrera and Ainlay, 1983](#_bookmark13)) and was originally conceptualised by [Cobb (1976](#_bookmark24), p. 300) as those informational cues which lead someone to feel “cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations”. [Cobb (1976)](#_bookmark24) highlighted the buffering role of social support in preventing or relieving stress, and in facilitating adaptation during changes requiring coping strategies. In the same year, [Cassel (1976)](#_bookmark20), proposed social support was instrumental for human flourishing and well-being. As [Thoits (1995)](#_bookmark101) elaborates, social support theory emerged from the recognition that social relationships play a role in moderating psychological stress and well-being. Social support, therefore, emphasises the type and amount of support individuals perceive from their social networks ([Sarason, 2013](#_bookmark90)), especially during periods of change ([Thoits, 1995](#_bookmark101)). Individuals who engage in social support exhibit better well-being and reduced stress ([Kort-Butler, 2018](#_bookmark60)).

Social support is determined by both context and location, which shape its quality and quantity ([Turner and Marino, 1994](#_bookmark102)). Several types of social support exist, such as emotional, informational, tangible (or instrumental), and appraisal (or belongingness) support.

Sources of social support can also vary, such as from parents or family members, peers, and secondary groups such as schools and community affiliations. [Hupcey (1998)](#_bookmark51) conceptualises the structure of social support as comprising of social networks and embedded perceptions of support, provider behaviours, reciprocal support, and types of support provided. Social networks are therefore foundational since they provide the social connections within the environment for social support to ensue ([Doeglas](#_bookmark29) *[et al.](#_bookmark29)*[, 1996](#_bookmark29)). As social networks are interactive ([Oakley, 2018](#_bookmark74)), their structure comprises of both the interaction process and involved individuals, as the sources. Social comparison or comparing oneself to others to enhance oneself ([Suls](#_bookmark99) *[et al](#_bookmark99)*[., 2002](#_bookmark99)), and social competence or appropriately adapting to others ([Rose-Krasnor,](#_bookmark88) [1997](#_bookmark88)), are deemed as relevant skills in making the most out of social support.

Not surprisingly, social support theory has been applied in s-commerce research to understand how to facilitate and enhance online user relationships and trust, and subsequently loyalty ([Hajli, 2014](#_bookmark40); [Liang *et al*., 2011](#_bookmark63)). After all, s-commerce’s success is characterised by adaptive conversation and community ([Huang and Benyoucef, 2013](#_bookmark50)) and therefore predisposing its users to a *metaverse* of social interactions and consequential support. Indeed, people “hang out” in online communities to receive social support ([Ridings](#_bookmark87) [and Gefen, 2004](#_bookmark87)).

The logic of social support underpinning s-commerce is thus based on the premise that the former facilitates the latter, i.e. the greater the social support within an online social network,

the greater the propensity for sharing supportive information with others ([Liang *et al*., 2011](#_bookmark63)). As [Hajli (2014](#_bookmark40), p. 19) elaborates, “Users on these platforms provide support to each other ... the social interactions of individuals through social media facilitate and influence their decisions in the purchase process.”

Although multi-faceted, social support essentially provides informational and emotional support ([Wellman *et al*., 1996](#_bookmark106); [Wellman and Wortley, 1990](#_bookmark104)). These two factors are considered as “critical support instrument(s) for social commerce” ([Sheikh *et al*., 2019](#_bookmark93), p. 73) since they

bring warmth to users in SNSs ([Liang *et al*., 2011](#_bookmark63)). Their effects have been validated in

enhancing online trust ([Hajli, 2014](#_bookmark40); [Lin *et al.*, 2019](#_bookmark66)), online relationship quality ([Sheikh *et al*.,](#_bookmark93) [2019](#_bookmark93)) and online purchase decisions ([Hajli, 2014](#_bookmark40); [Sheikh *et al*., 2019](#_bookmark93)). Emotional support enhances a sense of inclusion and belongingness within the community, while informational support compliments this inclusion by providing additional reassurance and trust ([Crocker](#_bookmark26) [and Canevello, 2008](#_bookmark26)). Whether informational or emotive, support capital can increase the intention to conduct commercial online decisions ([Liang *et al*., 2011](#_bookmark63)) by fostering a user- centred approach ([Shin, 2013](#_bookmark95)). Accordingly, we apply social support theory as our main theoretical foundation to investigate how Gen Z interacts with s-commerce.

While existing studies have validated the role of social support in enhancing online relationship quality and s-commerce intentions ([Liang *et al*., 2011](#_bookmark63); [Hajli, 2014](#_bookmark40), [Sheikh *et al*.,](#_bookmark93) [2019](#_bookmark93), etc.), these studies tend to explore perceptions of millennial consumers ([Liang *et al*.,](#_bookmark63) [2011](#_bookmark63)) or cross-age samples ([Sheikh *et al*., 2019](#_bookmark93); [Hajli, 2014](#_bookmark40); [Shin, 2013](#_bookmark95)). [Bai *et al.* (2015)](#_bookmark12) average sample age of 27 years comes closest to measuring Gen Z’s perceptions and findsa positive and significant association between social support and purchase behaviours (*beta* 5 0.433), but this study does not differentiate between informational and emotional sources of social support. Therefore, the dynamics of social support within a s-commerce context for Gen Z remains limited, and yet Gen Z is not only shaping the future of online shopping but is also characterised by a heightened need for user-centred social support platforms. While the aforementioned studies provide an initial foray in understanding the role of social support within s-commerce, several knowledge gaps remain in understanding how Gen Z engage with social commerce, formulated below as our study hypotheses and conceptual framework.

Hypothesis development and conceptual model

*Social commerce information sharing* The ability of online consumers to engage, interact and share information with other users, i.e. engage in s-commerce information sharing activities, is believed to increase the warmth and social desirability of the SNS ([Hajli](#_bookmark47) *[et al.](#_bookmark47)*[, 2017](#_bookmark47)). Therefore, social support information sharing is central to leveraging greater participation in s-commerce. The more intense the frequency and depth of mutual platform sharing, the stronger the social presence or experience of “others as psychologically present” ([Hassanein and Head, 2005](#_bookmark48), p. 31). For [Kaplan and](#_bookmark54) [Haenlein (2010)](#_bookmark54), these effects are more pronounced for interpersonal and synchronous communications than mediated and asynchronous ones.

However, the more media enables human interactions, the greater its social presence effect ([Hassanein and Head, 2005](#_bookmark48)). Therefore, personal connections via recommendations, reviews, and sharing facilitate the same effect since customers can engage in personal interactions ([Piller and Walcher, 2006](#_bookmark81)). Social presence, in turn, leads to social trust ([Hajli, 2015](#_bookmark41)). Social trust works by sanctioning systems as more reliable ([Mutz, 2005](#_bookmark72)), and therefore consumer- based reviews and ratings are viewed as more trustworthy ([Park *et al*., 2007](#_bookmark75); [Ba and Pavlou,](#_bookmark9) [2002](#_bookmark9)). The exchange of both verbal and non-verbal forms of mutual interaction facilitates social support ([Pfeil](#_bookmark80) *[et al](#_bookmark80)*[., 2009](#_bookmark80)). Therefore, specific sharing activities such as rating, reviews, rankings, recommendations, comments, and sharing activities are essential incubators of

social support ([Hajli](#_bookmark47) *[et al.](#_bookmark47)*[, 2017](#_bookmark47); [Baghdadi, 2016](#_bookmark10)). Moreover, since s-commerce information sharing requires a predisposition to disclose personal information, i.e. mutual trust ([Bilgihan](#_bookmark17) [*et al*., 2014](#_bookmark17)), it has a spillover effect on generating trust for the e-vendor ([Hajli](#_bookmark47) *[et al.](#_bookmark47)*[, 2017](#_bookmark47)). Therefore, and for Gen Z, we hypothesise that:

*H1.* Social commerce information sharing activities have a positive effect on social support.

 *H2.* Social commerce information sharing activities has a positive effect on online trust.

*Social support*

Since trust deals with consumer willingness to become vulnerable to the actions of vendors, any intervention to reduce this vulnerability should likely facilitate trust ([Gefen *et al*., 2003](#_bookmark38)). Several studies have validated the positive influence of social support on online trust (e.g. [Hajli, 2014](#_bookmark40); [Zhang *et al*., 2014](#_bookmark109); [Yahia *et al.*, 2018](#_bookmark107)). A key challenge for online vendors is to instil integrity and perceived benevolence, two key components of online trust in consumers ([Gefen, 2002](#_bookmark36)). Social support may thus provide a facilitating culture that attenuates integrity and benevolence. Informational support, from suggestions, for instance, may help alleviate uncertainty and therefore foster stronger integrity. Emotional support through expressions of care, concern, and empathy may facilitate a sense of belongingness in the platform and thus also spill over into trust ([Hajli, 2014](#_bookmark40)). Combined, both types of social support may accumulate to a sense of mutuality ([Yahia *et al.*, 2018](#_bookmark107)), thus fostering a supportive environment for s-commerce to ensue ([Zhang *et al*., 2014](#_bookmark109)). The effects of emotional and informational on online consumer trust have been validated for cross-age samples ([Hajli,](#_bookmark40) [2014](#_bookmark40); [Yahia *et al.*, 2018](#_bookmark107)). Therefore, and for Gen Z, we hypothesize:

*H3.* Social support has a positive influence on online trust

Perceived risk on intention to purchase

Perceived risk, or uncertainty and the consequences associated with one’s actions ([Bauer,](#_bookmark14) [1960](#_bookmark14); [Cunningham, 1967](#_bookmark27)), amplifies in online contexts ([Johnson *et al*., 2008](#_bookmark52); [Hoffman *et al*.,](#_bookmark49) [1999](#_bookmark49); [Rehman *et al*., 2020](#_bookmark85); [Maseeh *et al*., 2021](#_bookmark68)) and is considered a particular problem for Gen Z ([Pavao and Khalil, 2019](#_bookmark77)). The spatial and temporal distance between buyers and shoppers increases in online environments ([Tan, 1999](#_bookmark100)), which heightens the ambiguity of social interactions ([Johnson *et al*., 2008](#_bookmark52)). Although perceived risk is a multi-dimensional construct ([Chiu *et al*., 2014](#_bookmark23)), perceptions related to privacy concerns, or control and protection of personal information, is considered a central in conceptualising perceived online risk ([Liao](#_bookmark64) [*et al*., 2011](#_bookmark64)). Indeed, risk related to privacy concerns has attracted considerable concern and attention from scholarly enquiry (e.g. [Miyazaki and Fernandez, 2001](#_bookmark69); [Slyke *et al.*, 2006](#_bookmark96); [Brown](#_bookmark18) [and Muchira, 2004](#_bookmark18), etc). The consensus appears to be that perceived risk, mainly related to privacy concerns, has a negative effect on purchase intentions ([Liao *et al*., 2011](#_bookmark64)). The direct effects of privacy concerns are thought to operate via stimulating protection intention or the need to remain vigilant from negative outcomes ([Yang and Wang, 2009](#_bookmark108)). Given that Gen Z is more prone to risk avoidance ([Priporas](#_bookmark84) *[et al](#_bookmark84)*[., 2017](#_bookmark84); [Parker and Igielnik, 2020](#_bookmark76); [Pavao and](#_bookmark77) [Khalil, 2019](#_bookmark77)), we hypothesize:

*H4.* Perceived privacy risk has a negative effect on the intention to purchase.

*Trust* Developing online trust is regarded as one of the key facilitators of consumer participation in e-commerce ([Gefen, 2002](#_bookmark36); [Reichheld and Schefter, 2000](#_bookmark86); [Chen and Dibb, 2010](#_bookmark22)). Not unlike

perceived risk, the importance of trust is amplified in online contexts given the increased ambiguity of technology-based services ([Johnson *et al*., 2008](#_bookmark52)). Online s-commerce is thus less verifiable and controllable ([Gefen, 2000](#_bookmark35); [Reichheld and Schefter, 2000](#_bookmark86)). Trust helps overcome the psychological barriers related to this additional layer of ambiguity in online contexts ([Pavlou and Fygenson, 2006](#_bookmark78); [Yahia *et al.*, 2018](#_bookmark107)). Indeed, studies have validated the positive effects of online trust on purchase intention (e.g. [Hajli *et al.*, 2017](#_bookmark47); [Kim and Park, 2013](#_bookmark57)). What has emerged is the importance of trust in SNSs as bridge for trust towards the e-vendor ([Hajli](#_bookmark47)

[*et al.*, 2017](#_bookmark47)). Therefore, consumers evaluate trust towards e-vendors based on their trust in an

SNS’s credibility and benevolence. Trust also fosters familiarity, which has been found to positively predict purchase intentions ([Laroche *et al*., 1996](#_bookmark62)), and reduce complexity in decision-making in an online environment ([Gefen *et al*., 2003](#_bookmark38)). Despite this consensus, no previous study has validated the same relationship for Gen Z enabled s-commerce. Given Generation Z’s heightened uncertainty, we expect a strong and positive effect of online trust on purchase intention. Therefore, we hypothesize:

*H5.* Online trust has a positive effect on the intention to purchase.

The conceptual model in [Figure 1](#_bookmark5) summarises these hypotheses.

Methodology

In this section, we describe specific approaches to examine our conceptual model and hypotheses. We first explain our data collection method and sample characteristics. Next, measurement instruments in our empirical model are carefully discussed. Finally, we provide detailed information about data analysis. In this study, we used Covariance-based Structural Equation Modelling (CB-SEM) as our data analysis method.

*Data collection and sample* We collect our research data from an online survey. In order to study the various facets of how customers perceive social commerce context and privacy issues, we provided a well- structured and context-based questionnaire with 21 questions. This approach serves as a reasonable basis for the study and a more comprehensive understanding of customers’ online purchase behaviours in an s-commerce context. It allows customers to specify their social support and correctly reflect their attitudes and opinions towards purchasing a new product online. The participants are aged 18–35. To ensure our sample represented Gen Z, we

Figure 1.

The conceptual model

included an age-based screening question. The average sample age was 21.6. [Table A1](#_bookmark111) reports the respondents’ demographic profile.

Specifically, our primary research participants are online customers who have experience in an online community. In order to maintain the validity and reliability of the survey, we designed the questions for our respondents carefully. At the beginning of the survey, we provide basic descriptions of online communities and s-commerce. This can help participants better understand the concept of s-commerce and online community,

 even though they have experienced it. We tried our best efforts to provide a big picture of this study and to rule out possible common method variance, as they don’t need to overstate their competence to complete the survey. Next, we guided them to be aware of changes in their surroundings and their attitudes toward themselves when interacting with an online community. We told the respondents that we wanted to know how new product online purchase behaviour was perceived in social commerce, trust beliefs, and privacy concerns. We also used some screening questions (e.g. “I actively involve in the online community”) to ensure that the participants have experience in an online community. If the participants choose they have no experience with an online community, we kindly informed them to exist the survey. We also utilized attention checks and questions randomisation approaches to ensure the survey’s validity. After careful screening (e.g. removing missing data and those responses that were not conscientious), the final sample consisted of 195 participants.

*Measurement items*

In order to maintain the reliability of all constructs in the model, we adapted measurements from previous well-established scales and made minor adjustments to fit our research context. According to social support theory, social support in a s-commerce context can be divided into emotional and informational support. Correspondingly, we adapted social support measurements from [Hajli (2014)](#_bookmark40), which perfectly captures both emotional support and informational support in the s-commerce context. It is measured through items such as “When faced with difficulties, some people in this online community comforted and encouraged me (emotional support).” and “When I encountered a problem, some people on this online community would give me information to help me overcome the problem (informational support).”

The measurement for trust beliefs (this study conceptualises trust in online communities) was adapted from [Gefen *et al*. (2003)](#_bookmark38) and made adjustments for the s-commerce context. One example of an item is “The performance of this online community always meets my expectations.” We also adapted items from [Hajli *et al.* (2017)](#_bookmark47) to measure intention to buy a new product (e.g. “If my friends ask for advice about a product in this online community, I intent on sharing it with them.”) and social commerce information sharing (example item as “I will ask my friends on forums and communities to provide me with their suggestions before I go shopping for a new product.”). A five-point Likert scale was used to develop items into statements ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). All of the items used to measure the constructs are reflective.

We controlled several constructs that may possibly influence our investigation to rule out potential alternative explanations. First, previous research found that several demographic variables may influence the online purchase behaviours in social commerce (e.g. [Cutshall](#_bookmark28) [*et al*., 2022](#_bookmark28); [Akram *et al*., 2018](#_bookmark7)). Accordingly, gender and age are the two most commonly included control variables. We also controlled social media usage experiences, which reflect the extent to which one person is familiar with social media. Prior research has found that usage experiences influence attitudes towards online purchase behaviours (e.g. [Aladwani, 2018](#_bookmark8)).

Data analysis Structural equation modelling (SEM) is used to analyse empirical models. SEM is defined as a combination of two statistical methods of confirmatory factor analyses and regression analyses ([Fan *et al*., 2016](#_bookmark31)). Previous research has confirmed that the SEM method is ideal for analysing complex regression models with direct and indirect effects among latent variables simultaneously ([Hair *et al*., 2013](#_bookmark43)). We are using CB-SEM to test our hypotheses. There are two kinds of SEM methods: component-based or Partial Least Square (PLS)-SEM and CB-SEM.

PLS-SEM focuses on the composite factor model, while CB-SEM is based on the common

factor model ([Hair *et al*., 2016](#_bookmark44)). From the perspective of statistics, PLS-SEM accounts for total variance and uses it to investigate parameters. On the contrary, CB-SEM only focuses on common variance ([Hair *et al*., 2019](#_bookmark45)). The primary statistical goal of PLS-SEM is to maximise the variance of the dependent variable. In contrast, CB-SEM is to minimise the difference between the sample covariance ([Hair *et al*., 2019](#_bookmark45)). The theoretical focus of covariance-based SEM is trying to test and confirm the existed theory. [Petter (2018)](#_bookmark79) suggested that if the research requires understanding the goodness of the model and data or requires a global “goodness of fit” criterion, using covariance-based SEM is a better choice. Accordingly, we applied CB-SEM as our main data analysis method.

*Measurement model*

All the collected data are subjected to investigation reliability and validity at first. [Appendix](#_bookmark110) [Table A2](#_bookmark111) shows that all factor loadings were more than 0.7, which means the model had a good convergent validity ([Gefen and Straub, 2005](#_bookmark37); [Shi and Maydeu-Olivares, 2020](#_bookmark94)). Besides, [Appendix](#_bookmark110) [Table A2](#_bookmark111) shows all the results of composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and Cronbach’s Alpha. As all values of AVE are more than 0.5 for each constructor, all values of composite reliability larger than 0.7 for each indicator, and all values of Cronbach’s Alpha more than 0.7, we can conclude that all the constructs had good reliability and appropriate convergent validity ([Bagozzi and Yi, 1988](#_bookmark11)).

In order to investigate discriminant validity, we examined loadings, cross-loadings, and correlations of all constructs. Our results show that these items have higher loadings on their respective constructs than on other constructs. Furthermore, [Table A2](#_bookmark111) in [Appendix](#_bookmark110) confirms that the correlation between the constructs and the other constructs is lower than the square root of each construct’s AVE. Based on the results, discriminant validity is acceptable.

Unidimensionality is another essential aspect that we need to examine. As all items under each construct have acceptable factor loadings (all more than 0.6), we can conclude that there is no issue regarding unidimensionality ([Hair *et al*., 2006](#_bookmark42)). In order to examine common method variance, we checked variance inflation factor (VIF) values based on suggestions from [Kock (2015)](#_bookmark59). VIF is an indicator of common method bias and also an indication of pathological collinearity. [Appendix](#_bookmark110) [Table A2](#_bookmark111) shows that all VIF values of constructs are lower than 5, which indicates that common method variance and pathological collinearity is not a problem in our study. Meanwhile, based on the suggested threshold from [Hair *et al*.](#_bookmark46) [(2021)](#_bookmark46), there is no multicollinearity issue among variables of this study. As a result, we concluded that our study has no unidimensionality issue, common method bias issue, pathological collinearity issue, or multicollinearity issue.

*Structural Model with CB-SEM*

We applied Stata SE 16.1 to examine path coefficients in our research model. [Figure 2](#_bookmark6) shows all the standardised path coefficient results. All the indicators of model fit (e.g. RMSEA 5 0.118, SRMR 5 0.130) is good.

According to the results, all the relationships are significant except for perceived privacy risk to intention to buy. Specifically, we found that social commerce information sharing

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Figure 2.

Structural model



activities were positively associated with social support and trust in online communities. Thus, our [hypothesis 1](#_bookmark0) (*β* 5 0.729, *p* 5 0.000) and 2 (*β* 5 0.459, *p* 5 0.000) are supported. Meanwhile, we found that social support significantly and positively influenced trust in online communities (*β* 5 0.537, *p* 5 0.000), which indicates that our [hypothesis 3](#_bookmark2) is supported. However, the intention to buy was not significantly influenced by perceived privacy risk in online communities. Also, the intention to buy was significantly influenced by trust. Therefore, our results also support [hypothesis 5](#_bookmark4) (*β* 5 0.989, *p* 5 0.008) but not 4

(*β* 5 0.043, *p* 5 0.5).

There were no significant relationships between control variables and purchase intention. Specifically, all three control variables (gender, age, and social media usage experiences) did not significantly influence intention to buy a new product.

Discussion

The central aim of our research was to extend our knowledge on Gen Z enabled s-commerce. Using social support theory as its foundation, we developed a framework which assessed the effects of social support, s-commerce information sharing activities, trust and privacy on the purchase intention of Gen Z. Social information sharing activities were found to have a positive and significant effect on social support and trust and therefore [hypothesis 1](#_bookmark0) and [2](#_bookmark1) were accepted. The effect of social support on online trust was also found to be positive and significant and therefore [hypothesis 3](#_bookmark2) was accepted. While the positive effect of online trust on purchase intention was also validated, and therefore [hypothesis 5](#_bookmark4) accepted, we did not find any support for the hypothesised negative effect of perceived privacy risk on purchase intention and therefore [hypothesis 4](#_bookmark3) was rejected. We therefore found support for all our hypothesised pathways, with the exception of the effect privacy concerns. A number of implications arise from our findings.

First, the positive and strong effect of social commerce information sharing activities on both social support and online trust validates the importance of user-generated content in SNSs. Given the dual role of s-commerce information sharing activities on both social support and online trust, we consider this construct a foundation for creating a seamless and user-centred experience for Gen Z. The proliferation of platform reviews, recommendations and interaction options reinforces the importance of information sharing activities.

Social engagement in an online platform is initially with strangers, and such sharing activities provide an important mechanism to break the ice and sustain relational engagement ([Sheikh *et al*., 2019](#_bookmark93)). In our study, these sharing activities were measured by assessing the value of perceived sharing of reviews and recommendations. This type of activity provides both reassurance and familiarity with s-commerce decision-making, thus fostering a sense of social support as well as reducing ambiguity and therefore encouraging trust. Therefore, it encourages user-centred design of s-commerce platforms by encouraging

consumer generated content and therefore further validating a sense of belongingness and

inclusivity in s-commerce communities. This directly feeds into the second key implication of our findings, the strong and positive effect of social support on online trust. On the one hand sharing activities have a direct effect on trust by reducing ambiguity and providing reassurance, but also an indirect effect through informational and emotional social support effects. Emotional support through perceived care, concern, and interest of other users and informational support through user suggestions both feed into providing additional reassurance and therefore trust.

Third, the strong and established effects of online trust on online purchase intention were also validated in our findings, reinforcing the centrality of trust in consumer decision-making. This finding relationship was particularly strong and indicates the importance of trust for Gen Z. The theoretical and managerial implications of this pronounced effect for Gen Z will be discussed subsequently, but the findings demonstrate the importance of user-centred design for fostering trust in Gen Z enabled s-commerce SNSs.

Fourth, our findings did not support the effects of privacy concerns on purchase intentions. Given the prevalence of existing literature that supports a negative relationship between perceived privacy concerns and purchase intention, this finding was surprising and will be discussed in more detail subsequently. However, [Pavao and Khalil’s (2019)](#_bookmark77) shed some interesting observations on privacy concerns of Gen Z worth discussing here. In explaining the paradoxical higher reporting of privacy concerns and higher engagement in s-commerce, they suggest that Gen Z, despite higher privacy concerns, cannot do without the convenience of digitalisation in their lives. The higher concerns of risk and uncertainty they report are therefore offset by the burden or fear of missing out on digitalisation.

*Theoretical implications*

Our findings contribute to the existing literature in several ways. First, we validate and extend our understanding of s-commerce sharing activities. While previous studies have examined the relationship between sharing activities and online trust, either as a composite of relationship quality ([Sheikh *et al*., 2019](#_bookmark93)), or directly with trust ([Hajli, 2015](#_bookmark41); [Lin](#_bookmark66) [*et al.*, 2019](#_bookmark66)), our study hypothesised sharing activities as antecedent to both trust and social support. We therefore extend the utility of s-commerce sharing activities in s-commerce and validate, for the first time, its positive effect on both social support and online trust.

Second, we provide support for a new way to understand Gen Z’s attitudes and perception about s-commerce through the identification of antecedents incorporating several main factors, drawing upon the social support theory. Specifically, we offer a novel explanation for highlighting the important role of social support in s-commerce sharing activities by extending the social support theory. Our approach goes beyond the current social support theory literature that mainly focuses on how the impact of social support on performance variables (see [Hajli (2014)](#_bookmark40) for an example). This study answered the call by [Sarker *et al*. (2019)](#_bookmark91) that future information systems research needs to look more at humanistic variables. By analysing the relationship between social support and trust, we highlight the importance of humanistic factors in research, especially we point out the

importance of mental health of Gen Z. By doing so, this study identifies factors that s-commerce platforms can use to encourage customers’ positive behaviours.

Third, the effect of social support on online trust (0.422) was found to be comparable (0.40 and 0.407) to cross-age studies ([Lin *et al.*, 2019](#_bookmark66); [Hajli, 2015](#_bookmark41)) examining the same effect. These findings however are considerably higher than studies ([Sheikh *et al*., 2019](#_bookmark93); [Liang *et al*., 2011](#_bookmark63)) examining the effects of social support on trust, as a composite of relationship quality (0.115, 0.260). Therefore, our findings add support to conceptualising online trust on its own and

 therefore potentially as part of the online trust-commitment pathway. This is important since the role of online trust on purchase intention in our findings was higher than cross-age studies, leading to our third contribution. While [Hajli (2015)](#_bookmark41) and [Lin *et al.* (2019)](#_bookmark66) also found a positive effect from trust to purchase intention for older users of s-commerce (0.375, 0.28), our study demonstrates a considerably stronger positive effect in Gen Z (0.583). We, therefore, validate existing studies on the trust-purchase intention relationship in s-commerce but also add to our knowledge on the relatively greater importance of this relationship for Gen Z. Therefore, online trust is deemed vital for Gen Z and may also explain the anomaly in our study on the effects of privacy concerns. Unlike previous studies (e.g. [Liao *et al*., 2011](#_bookmark64); [Priporas *et al*., 2017](#_bookmark84)), privacy concerns were found to have an anomalous positive effect on the intention to purchase, pointing to a new understanding on the role of privacy concerns for Gen Z. Conventional thinking and scholarly consensus (e.g. [Liao *et al*., 2011](#_bookmark64); [Wang and](#_bookmark105) [Herrando, 2019](#_bookmark105)) posit a negative relationship between privacy concerns and purchase intention. This is intuitive since the greater the ambiguity in relation to security of information, the greater the reluctance to engage. For Gen Z, and paradixally it would appear the reverse to be true. While [Pavao and Khalil (2019)](#_bookmark77) observe this phenomenon, our study is the first to validate its effects for Gen Z.

*Managerial implications*

Our study has multiple implications for s-commerce managers. The role of online trust is already widely recognised as essential in converting engagement to purchase intention, but our study shows this is more pronounced for Gen Z. Moreover, the positive role of s-commerce sharing activities and social support on online trust points to their importance in fostering trust. An itinerary of interventions is available to SNS managers to manage trust by encouraging transaction safety, communications, reputation, and ease of use ([Kim and Park,](#_bookmark57) [2013](#_bookmark57)). However, user-generated social sharing activities and social support can also be encouraged to complement these factors and underpin their organic growth. We would therefore encourage s-commerce managers to amplify efforts to creating s-commerce environments where emotional and informational support is embedded with the facilitation of user-generated content such as reviews, sharing, recommendations, etc.

An inclusive s-commerce environment where Gen Z feels a sense of belonging needs a dedicated strategic focus. Novel ways to facilitate social sharing activities and greater accessibility to emotional and informational support may help to activate the strong trust- intention pathway of Gen Z users. The recent proliferation of animating emotive cues, such as GIF buttons and other animated reactions, facilitates warmth and belongingness. Facebook’s “metaverse” of virtual animated optional interactions are likely to play on this hyper- mediated warmth and belongingness, and therefore heightening the ease with which users provide social support to each other. Providing users with mediated names and identities that can navigate sites “on behalf” of users facilitates the feeling of “being there” and, therefore, inclusion. We know from recent research that SNS users trust animated and algorithmic interventions to human interaction ([Kim *et al*., 2021](#_bookmark58); [Kozinets, 2021](#_bookmark61)). Managers may also want to segment users based on social information seeking activities amplifying the accuracy of online behavioural segmentation.

In the s-commerce context, privacy concern is always the focal factor influencing customers’ online purchasing behaviours. In view of the positive relationship between perceived privacy risks and purchase intention, we encourage s-commerce managers to ethically design s-commerce sites. While Gen Z is clearly willing to offset concerns of privacy for not missing out on s-commerce, we would encourage managers to place safeguarding mechanisms to ensure that users do not compromise privacy. We suggest enhancing the s-commerce environment for Gen Z by incorporating traditional approaches, for example, facilitating transactional security,

trust, and making good use of personal data cautiously but also dynamically adjusting

individuals’ needs via personalised information. Educational measures should also be considered by s-commerce to ensure additional layers of safeguarding.

*Limitations and future research directions*

Several limitations exist in our study, which has implications for further research. First, a cross SNS sample was employed for our study, and yet individual SNSs may exhibit site specific dynamics. Future studies may therefore seek to explore these SNS specific dynamics. Second, we relied on a cross-sectional sample to validate our conceptual model.

Experimental and longitudinal studies may provide additional insights on manipulating individual constructs across time.

Third, our study was limited in the scope of the conceptual model, but additional variables, such as moderation effects of experience, habit, or relationship quality, may provide yet richer insights into the dynamics governing the world of Gen Z.

Fourth, our scale for perceived risk was generic to SNS rather than to SNS vendors. It would be interesting to assess the use of both operationalisations in future research to map the difference of institutional risk relative to vendor risk on purchase intention.

Fifth, the moderating effects of online trust on privacy concern effects could not be investigated, but it is possible that a host of constructs may play a negative moderating effect on privacy concerns. These variables may cause consumers to trade off or compromise their vulnerability to privacy concerns ([Plangger and Montecchi, 2020](#_bookmark82)). It is also possible [Featherman](#_bookmark32) [and Pavlou’s (2003)](#_bookmark32) scale for perceived privacy risk does not focus on vulnerability towards the specific SNS vendor, and therefore vendor specific perceived risk is not captured in our study. Sixth, different conceptualisations of online trust such as [Lin *et al.*’s (2019)](#_bookmark66) multi-faceted measure may provide richer insights on the inter-relationship between trust towards other users and the spillover effect on e-vendor trust. As an initial foray into how social support, sharing activities, trust, and privacy concerns affect s-commerce for Gen Z, our study presents many interesting avenues for further research into the most important segment for online retail.

Conclusion

Our study explored the new stream of s-commerce from the perspective of Gen Z. While emergent studies on s-commerce are growing, their focus tends to be on millennials and cross- age groups. Given the growth of Gen Z in shaping the online shopping experience of the future, and their unique and growing vulnerability to uncertainty, we deemed an application to Gen Z necessary and overdue. We borrowed existing constructs from the s-commerce literature, namely, social support, s-commerce information sharing, privacy concerns, and online trust to assess their effect on the intention to purchase. We found strong support for the role of social support and social information sharing activities on online trust. We also find online trust has a stronger effect on the intention to purchase compared to studies exploring older and cross-age groups. While our findings on perceived risk remain inconclusive, they do point to managing s-commerce for Gen Z responsibly and ethically. Therefore, we encourage further research in exploring s-commerce dynamics of Gen Z.

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

#

Appendix

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Measure | Items | Frequency | Percent |
| Gender | Women | 100 | 52 |
|  |  |  | Men | 95 | 48 |
| Table A1. |  | Age | 18–29 | 155 | 80 |
| Demographic profile |  |  | 30–35 | 40 | 20 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Latent and manifest variables | Mean | Std. dev. | Loadings | CR | Cronbach’s Alpha | AVE |
|  |  |  |  | 0.902 | 0.902 | 0.567 |
| *Emotional Support*When faced with difficulties, some people on | 0.771 | 0.033 | 0.75 |  |  |  |
| this online community are on my side with me When faced with difficulties, some people on | 0.743 | 0.037 | 0.70 |  |  |  |
| this online community comforted and encouraged meWhen faced with difficulties, some people on | 0.682 | 0.043 | 0.68 |  |  |  |
| this online community listened to me talking about my private feelingsWhen faced with difficulties, some people on | 0.750 | 0.037 | 0.74 |  |  |  |
| this online community expressed interest and concern in my well-being |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Informational support*On this online community, some people | 0.776 | 0.033 | 0.81 |  |  |  |
| would offer suggestions when I needed help When I encountered a problem, some people | 0.784 | 0.033 | 0.70 |  |  |  |
| on this online community would give me information to help me overcome the problem When faced with difficulties, some people on | 0.755 | 0.042 | 0.75 |  |  |  |
| this online community would help me discover the cause and provide me with suggestions |  |  |  | 0.859 | 0.751 | 0.672 |
| The performance of this online community always meets my expectations This online community can be counted on as | 0.8640.863 | 0.0200.022 | 0.690.88 |  |  |  |
| a good online communityThis online community is a reliable online | 0.724 | 0.046 | 0.84 |  |  |  |
| community |  |  |  | 0.832 | 0.729 | 0.555 |
| Table A2. | I will ask my forums and communities to provide me with their suggestions before I go | 0.715 | 0.044 | 0.70 |  |  |  |

Indicators loadings and latent variables composite reliabilities (CRs) and average variances extracted (AVEs) for the SEM

shopping for a new product

I am willing to recommend a new product that is worth buying for my friends on this online community

0.840 0.027 0.86

(*continued* )

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Latent and manifest variables | Mean | Std. dev. | Loadings | CR | Cronbach’s Alpha | AVE |  |  |
| I am willing to share my own shopping | 0.713 | 0.044 | 0.74 |  |  |  |  |  |
| experience of a new product with my friends |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| on forums and communities or through |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ratings and reviews |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I would like to use people’s online | 0.700 | 0.044 | 0.71 |  |  |  |  |  |
| recommendations to buy a new product |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  | 0.864 | 0.790 | 0.615 |  |  |
| I am concerned that social networking sites | 0.775 | 0.046 | 0.77 |  |  |  |  |  |
| are collecting too much personal information |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| about me |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I’m worried that unknown third parties will | 0.740 | 0.038 | 0.72 |  |  |  |  |  |
| access my personal information on social |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| networking sites |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I suspect that my privacy is not well protected | 0.780 | 0.030 | 0.82 |  |  |  |  |  |
| by social networking sites |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I am concerned about the privacy of the | 0.838 | 0.027 | 0.70 |  |  |  |  |  |
| personal information that social networking |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| sites captures about me |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  | 0.836 | 0.739 | 0.561 |  |  |
| If my friends ask for advice about a product | 0.742 | 0.039 | 0/74 |  |  |  |  |  |
| in this online community, I intent to share it |  |  |  |
| with them |  |  |  |
| If my friends offer information about a | 0.790 | 0.031 | 0.72 |
| product in this online community, I would act |  |  |  |
| on them |  |  |  |
| If I need information about a new product, I | 0.737 | 0.050 | 0.76 |
| would consider the experiences of my friends |  |  |  |
| in this online community |  |  |  |
| If a professional advisor offers advice based | 0.723 | 0.047 | 0.75 |
| on his/her experience in this online |  |  |  |
| community, I would act on them |  |  | Table A2. |

Note(s): Italic values indicate the square root of AVE. These values should exceed the inter-construct correlations. The values below indicate the square of correlations

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Constructs (fornell-lacker criterion) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1 Intention to buy a new product | *0.749* |  |  |  |  |
| 2 Perceived privacy risk | 0.282 | *0.784* |  |  |  |
| 3 Social commerce information sharing | 0.657 | 0.362 | *0.745* |  |  |
| 4 Social support | 0.710 | 0.312 | 0.595 | *0.753* |  |
| 5 Trust in online communities | 0.617 | 0.228 | 0.548 | 0.599 | *0.820* |

Table A3.

Discriminant validity

with CB-SEM