

THEORIZING SOCIAL COMMERCE SUCCESS FACTORS: THE ISLAMIC BUSINESS MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The development of social networking sites (SNNs) promotes for the emergence of social commerce. While social commerce has been widely accepted especially in the East, its simplicity and open interactions draw the attention of data and business protection needs. In addition, as more and more Muslims are participating in social commerce, it is imperative to evaluate how the practices comply with Islamic business rules. Therefore, based on the Muamalat principles, an insight is offered on how social commerce should be operated without violating the Islamic philosophies of business conducts via the Islamic marketing strategy, business ethics and sharia compliance business transactions. It is believed that by providing the discussion, it would safeguard both business and customers from any malpractices and business dishonesty that will jeopardize the Muslims' image. Furthermore, this paper also provides recommendations and future research strategies.

Keywords: Social commerce, online business, Islamic business management, business ethics, commerce and Muamalat

INTRODUCTION

The advancement in communication, information, and multimedia technologies with the extended use of the Internet, websites and others' virtual application technologies are generating gradual innovation in diverse areas. One of them is utilizing the maximum capability of social media and turning them to be social commerce. This innovation has led to the proliferation of new business styles or concepts based on information and knowledge (Garrigos, 2010). As consumers have adopted social technologies, merchants and manufacturers have responded by providing features such as ratings and reviews and integration to Twitter accounts, where consumers share promotions and new products. Business operators are innovating the shopping experience with social technologies such as a Facebook store and integrated social campaigns.

Obviously, these new trends are facilitating the construction of strong social media and virtual communities, affecting the design of websites, and in general, increasing the competitiveness of organizations. In adopting social commerce, Huang and Benyoucef (2013) found that small businesses are keen to engage in this new business model. In addition to the impact of social media to the small business, Huang and Benyoucef (2013) identified the social media business model as consumers' connectivity and the interactivity functioned by the small business. Social media platform may allow the management of the small business operators to treat the consumers as a part of the business process, such as marketing.

However, the simplicity of the social commerce model and the open interactions among netizens in the social commerce community often draw the attention of protecting not only the consumers, but also the business operators. There were cases where netizens and the business operators tend to transcend the boundary of what is supposed to be performed and what should be avoided. Social commerce abuse cases include misdescribed products, bogus social selling and rivalry. Hence, ethics are very vital in social commerce.

In addition, as more and more Muslims are participating in social commerce business, it is imperative to evaluate how the practices comply with Islamic business rules and lead to the social commerce justice and success. Such attempt is significant to ensure that the customers are not bound by any malpractice that will jeopardize the Muslims' image for business dishonesties. Therefore, this paper attempts to discuss how the essence of Islamic principles could and should be implemented and practiced for social commerce success.

This paper is organized as follows: After the introduction section, the emergence of social commerce and its success measurement are discussed. It is followed by the discussion on the fundamental aspects of social commerce. After that, the application of social commerce from the Islamic Business Management approach is conferred before the conclusion is made.

The emergence of social commerce and its success measurement

Since the birth of the Internet, there are profound innovations in technology, theories, business models and concepts that have shaped business interactions. In the Internet environment, the Web 2.0 features of personalised and socialised characters had changed the nature of Internet use. With the evolvement of Web 3.0, the changes are greater. Utilizing Web 3.0 features in the social media allows consumers to engage in online purchasing via 'purchase via comment', 'payment via hashtag', 'in-stream transaction', 'reduce clicks' and 'make transaction viral'.

Social commerce has attracted the interests of many. Similarly, many studies have examined its adoption factors. Yet, the studies mostly focus on customer's intention (Liu, Chu, Huang & Chen, 2016; Lu, Fan & Zhou, 2016; Wang & Yu, 2017;). As social commerce is fundamentally built based on social networking and it works as an online purchase channel, the success measurement should not be much different from e-commerce success dimensions. Therefore, adapting the e-commerce success measurement and incorporating social networking features, the success is appropriate to be measured as social commerce site traffic, brand image, reputation and follower growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Commerce Site Traffic

Recognition of the internet is driving marketers in traditional companies to conduct transactions on the Internet (Chakraborty, Lala, & Warren, 2002). The committee of Web Analytics Association Standards defined the three most important metrics as Unique Visitors, Visits or Sessions, and Page Views, and also categorized search engine marketing metrics through counts (visits), ratios (page views per visit), and key performance indicators (KPIs). The main reason for measuring search engine marketing (SEM) as the success criteria is based on the evidences that there is increased traffic volume (76%), conversion rates (76%), click-through rates or CTRS (70%) and return on investment (67%). Progressive improvement of SEM campaigns, conversion rates, and website performance are available through web metrics, which would result in an increase in profits, happier customers, and higher return on investment (ROI) by tracking progress over time or against the competition. Hence, as social commerce is a subset of online business, measuring its site visit is important.

Brand Image

The success of social commerce can be measured by the brand images of the business. Popular brands attract more consumers as people like to be associated with brands that are truthful and reliable. The image could be revealed through product reviews and comments from the consumers. Potential and existing consumers tend to trust and believe what is written on the social media because of their willingness to rely on the words, actions, and decisions of other members in the social commerce community. Prior studies have found that trust toward members positively affects online participatory behaviors such as getting and giving information in the focal community (Chen & Shen, 2015).

Company Reputation

Company reputation is another measurement of social commerce success. Company reputation essentially signifies the success or failure of its brand. Poor brand decays the company reputation. The emergence of social media brings with it several threats to business reputation. People can easily generate, edit and share content with others. Such interactions and customer-generated content can be a threat to businesses since customers take an increasingly active role as market players through social media and are able to reach a wide audience (Gul, 2014). As social commerce is subject to open interactions, the business operator's ability to uphold its brand for customer loyalty calls for a special attention as a social commerce success.

Follower Growth

Followers on social media are the potential consumers for the business. It is important to build a steady follower trail on social media sites as it is important to keep the followers engaged. In order to keep the consumers engaged, the business should create an emotional bond in order to keep their attention. A specific example is to share a video on baking and decorating for an enhanced customer excitement. One significant finding was drawn from (Wattanasupachoke, 2011) who concluded that social network strategy is crucial in regulating the success of social commerce.

The fundamental aspects of social commerce

Social commerce is fundamentally built from the interactions of business management, technology and social networking and communication. Each aspect is discussed in the following sub-sections.

The Essential Business Aspects of Social Commerce

Social commerce poses promising opportunities for businesses. With a very minimum cost of marketing, sales orientation, and commercial applications of Web 2.0, social commerce has become a new trend in business. However, with the Internet growth, robustness of mobile technology, low barrier to entry and thousands of product choices, social commerce can easily become obsolete like many other e-commerce sites when the new applications of the Internet transpire. Kassim, Othman and Zamzuri (2016) conducted an in-depth analysis of the strategies adopted by social commerce operators. Five key strategies were found to be significant which are customer focus, innovative business model, legality, knowledge and technology alignment and gaining customers' trust. The ability to manage customers is the unique capability that differentiates one business from the other. A study conducted by Liang, Ho, Li, and Turban (2011) found that relationship quality affects users' intention of social commerce participation. By understanding their customers, businesses are able to optimize the benefits of market segmentation. In addition, unique business models such as creating a unique customer segmentation system that allows businesses to customize on the product advertisement and establishing a partnership are able to help business owners to stay competitive. Furthermore, regulations and policies have been found to be important for encouraging the social commerce industry (Kim, 2013). As there are a lot of threats and frauds in the online business, complying with the policies, rules and regulations is essential as they provide adequate protections. Furthermore, consistent learning on building the social commerce knowledge is also essential. This includes continuous learning to further exploit the online technology beyond its normal functions, learning to integrate the varying available tools to support businesses, learning to manage or organize different functions or activities of organizations, and learning to add values to current products and services. Finally, trust plays a role in sustaining social commerce. By ensuring the safety of customers during business transactions, trust will be created and social commerce will continue to be used as online business tools.

The emerging issue nowadays is to develop trusting relationship between customers and the business owners. Relying on the conventional methods is not sufficient as customers nowadays are more knowledgeable and demanding more actions from the business owners to convince them on their ability to fulfill the promises. Here, the Islamic principles in business come into play that serve as a pledge for trusted and honest business.

Business Strategy: Social Network

In the context of the contemporary business environment, the role of social network or social media has increased drastically. However, business operators are required to understand the objective of every social network platform and develop the marketing activities based on the relevant attributes of the social networking tools. By understanding the model, business operators will have the ability to react and respond to consumers' demand in a better way. Three aspects of social network strategies are important; publicity, content and interactivity.

Publicity

In order to encourage the Internet users to participate, the businesses should create a target group. The most recommended method is to utilise the search engine optimization (McLaughlin & Davenport, 2010). Besides, other methods such as viral marketing are equally important. Off the Internet, viral marketing has been referred to as "word-of-mouth", "creating a buzz", "leveraging the media" and "network marketing". But on the Internet, it is known as "viral marketing". Viral marketing is one of the successful approaches to publicize social networks. Once the company provides proper and adequate basic information to Internet users, there can be more members participating in the social network. In addition, Gross and Acquits (2005) asserted that publicity influences social commerce success. It can be achieved via transparency in customer's review.

Content

More people will join the online society because of the content exchanged between the members who share the same interests. Social media users tend to express their feeling by posting a comment and sharing information with others. The comment feature attracts users to become active members, revisit and contribute their own content. It makes social networks become an interactive virtual community that has a high traffic as expected (McLaughlin, & Davenport, 2010) and allows for business expansion. However, operators should be aware about the privacy issues of the consumers. The privacy system will ensure users that their content and information are visible only to those who are allowed to see or view the content.

Interactivity

Previous studies have found that heightening the level of a user's control might make consumers more engaged and involved, which would lead to a positive evaluation of the site (Fortin, & Dholakia, 2005). This positive feeling may, in turn, contribute to reinforcing one's perception of the company's (or the site's) relationship investment. In addition, allowing consumers to communicate bi-directionally may make them to think of the sites as more accessible, which may also be beneficial for building and sustaining relationships between both business operators and consumers (users). Finally, the sites that respond quickly and immediately to consumers' needs might be viewed as more concerned with building relationships with them.

Again, the issue of instituting trust in the relationship between customers and business operators emerges. Responding immediately to the demand of customers is not effectively sufficient to ensure business success. There are additional aspects that the customers can hold on during the interactions in the social networking sites. This issue will be discussed further in the coming section.

Technology Capability: Website Quality and Social Media Competencies

Social Commerce Site Quality

Technology is one of the fundamental components in social commerce. As social commerce is usually conducted on a website, studies have shown the importance of its website quality (Liang, et al., 2011), which constitutes service quality and system quality. The quality of site is determined by system functions and services. A good system quality allows users to use the site to fulfil their needs. A good service quality can help consumers gain the full power of the Website satisfactorily by matching consumers' expectations. High-quality social commerce sites can help users to conveniently connect and exchange information with their contacts. Therefore, enhancing the perceived system and service quality is important for social media operators.

Social Media Competencies

The social interaction feature is the fundamental platform of social commerce. Therefore, incompetent business operators receive uncomfortable payment for their interaction ignorance. It is important for business operators to clearly understand the objectives of every social media platform and develop business strategy based on the relevant attributes of social media tools. Business operators must be able to know their target group for their business and what tools that are mostly used by their target groups for effective marketing strategies.

To attract Muslim consumers to do business transactions using social commerce based on the website quality and social media competence alone is not enough. Showing Islamic features and upholding the Islamic principles in business can help increase the viability of the online business. Further discussion ensues in the following section.

The islamic business management approach

When a Muslim conducts a social commerce business, all activities must be governed by the Islamic conduct. This can be based on the Muamalat principle. A Muamalat principle is a set of rules (fiqh) related to worldly matters such as business, trading, commerce transactions, lending and borrowing contract. In Islam, followers have been taught to engage in a decent way of wealth acquisition, as Allah SWT states the issue through one of the Quranic verses as follows:

“O you who believe! Eat not up property among yourselves unjustly except it be a trade amongst you, by mutual consent. And do not kill yourselves (nor kill one another). Surely, Allah is Most Merciful to you (Al-Quran 4:29)”

From the verse above, one could find a strong message concerning trading. Islam guides Muslims to engage in commercial activities and to refrain from practice of charging interest or usury. Therefore, commerce is essential in Islam, for as long as the process is aligned with Islamic teaching in doing business. It should be noted that Islam views commerce as one of crucial factors in human life, so crucial that Allah (SWT) destined Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to be a successful businessman before his prophetic life (Antonio, 2007; Trim, 2009).

Social commerce is a business. Business is a part of Sunnah practiced by the beloved Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and even there were several *dalils* or verses mentioned in the Al- Quran and Hadith, which mentioned about business and benefits. In social commerce, the Muamalat

principles of marketing, business ethics and transactions are essential for a comprehensive business conduct.

Islamic Marketing Strategy

Marketing is one of the fundamental business core functions. In an open interaction business, there is no barrier in global marketplace, but it has to be conducted with sincere honesty. Prophet Muhammad S.A.W particularly emphasizes that honesty and kind dealings with customers are the secret of success in business. “The truthful and honest merchant is associated with the Prophets, the upright and martyrs” (Al-Tirmidhi). In another hadith,

“Allah shows mercy to a person who is kindly when he sells, when he buys and when he makes a claim” (Al-Bukhari).

A lot of previous studies debated on what makes Islamic marketing. Some examples are ‘Does Islamic marketing require marketers to communicate with Muslims only?’, or ‘Must the marketer be a Muslim if he wants to conduct the Islamic marketing?’ Islamic marketing can be seen as a school of thought, which has a moral compass, which focuses on the ethical norms and values of Islam and how Muslims interpret these, from their varying cultural lenses.

Social commerce operators must run advertisements that fulfill the command of Allah (SAW). Islamic advertising is consistent with the concept of ‘Al-Bayan’, which is the obligation to describe all details of the product with full disclosure to consumers. Consumers are entitled to have as much information as possible about the goods or services and make choices based on the information obtained. The following verse of Al-Quran can be used as a guide on how advertising should work. Allah (SWT) says:

“And do not consume your wealth among yourselves in falsehood and (do not) you take (business) property to the judge so that you can take part of someone else's property with the (way of) sin, while you know”.

(Al-Quran, 2:188).

In social commerce, social media plays a role as marketing tools. For example, when business operators market their product and service, customers’ awareness is the aim. In social commerce context, if the business operators know and understand about the wide range of issues which are confederated with all the functions of marketing then they can manage the overall business effectively (Arham, 2010). In relation to the essence of social commerce, the Islamic marketing strategy concerns with honest publicity, truthful content, sincere interactivity and trustworthy customer relationships.

Upholding the Islamic Muamalat principles in social commerce is the first step in ensuring business success. Good intention and sincerity of business owners can be truly reflected and noticed by consumers through business owners’ words and actions. As a result, consumers are willing to commit and engage in the business and prolong the relationship.

Ethics

Ethics in Islam govern all aspects of human live. The concept of success or ‘*falah*’ for all Muslims covers both the way they manage their business affairs and the way they live their daily lives. Regardless of any situation, successful people who are described by Allah in the

al-Quran as people who are “inviting to all that is good (*khayr*), enjoining what is right (*ma'ruf*) and forbidding what is wrong (*munkar*)” (al-Quran 3:104). Human interaction is governed by ethical principles. There are established guidelines to be followed when involved in any interaction, Social commerce is not excluded. In the communication, both parties must strictly follow the ethical principles such as choosing the right words, so that no one will feel offended.

In social commerce, the Islamic conduct should be upheld to ensure equitable business transactions, involving purchasing and selling activities. To do this, business operators should practice clear business transaction. The buying and selling activities should be on mutual consent and not under coercion. Islam strictly prohibits such dealings in which both parties are not clear in terms of their roles, actions and other business specifications. Al-Quran tells us that every Muslim businessman must write down the agreement when dealing with the other persons and both parties must be clear with the transaction. The holy prophet was reported to have said, “Sale is not that, which is done without mutual consent, sale is a sale which involves only mutual consent” (Majah, 2176). Allah says in His book:

“O you who believe: Eat not up your property among yourselves unjustly except it may be trade among you by mutual consent” (part no 5, surah no 4 verse no 29.). “And whoever commits that through aggression and injustice, we shall cast him into the fire, and that is easy for Allah.” (Surah 04, part 05, verse no, 30.).

Therefore, regardless of the social commerce innovative models, the marketing strategies used and the social commerce site design, business transactions must be conducted in an acceptable manner following the Islamic business ethics. Besides, having adequate knowledge about the do's and the don'ts is significant in prohibiting any business from plunging into the ethical deviance.

Business Transaction

Islam pays great attention to social transactions where the interests of the contracting parties and the society are seriously taken into consideration. It also gives magnificent encouragement to lawful social transactions.

“Woe to those who deal in fraud. Those, when they take measure from people, take exact full measure. However, when they give by measure or by weight to them, they give less than due. Do they not think that they will be called to account? On a Mighty Day (Qur'an 83: 1-5)”.

The Prophet extols and encourages honesty and fair play in all social transactions, including buying and selling. He equates the status of honest traders to that of the Prophets, the righteous and the martyrs (*Shuhada'*). Throughout his prophet hood, he guided the Muslims towards Islamic-Compliant transactions. In social commerce, transaction plays significant roles in buying and selling processes. It is a crucial activity that must be done with full honesty in order to achieve social commerce success, which is in line with the Islamic teaching.

There are growing concerns among social commerce consumers particularly Muslims in Malaysia regarding online transaction both from security aspect and Shariah perspective. The first issue is regarding the medium of transaction via online and the second issue is pertaining

to the mode of payment, which is using credit card. As Malaysia is heading towards social commerce, purchasing online via credit cards is no longer a new trend; the challenges arise in looking for Shariah compliance solutions.

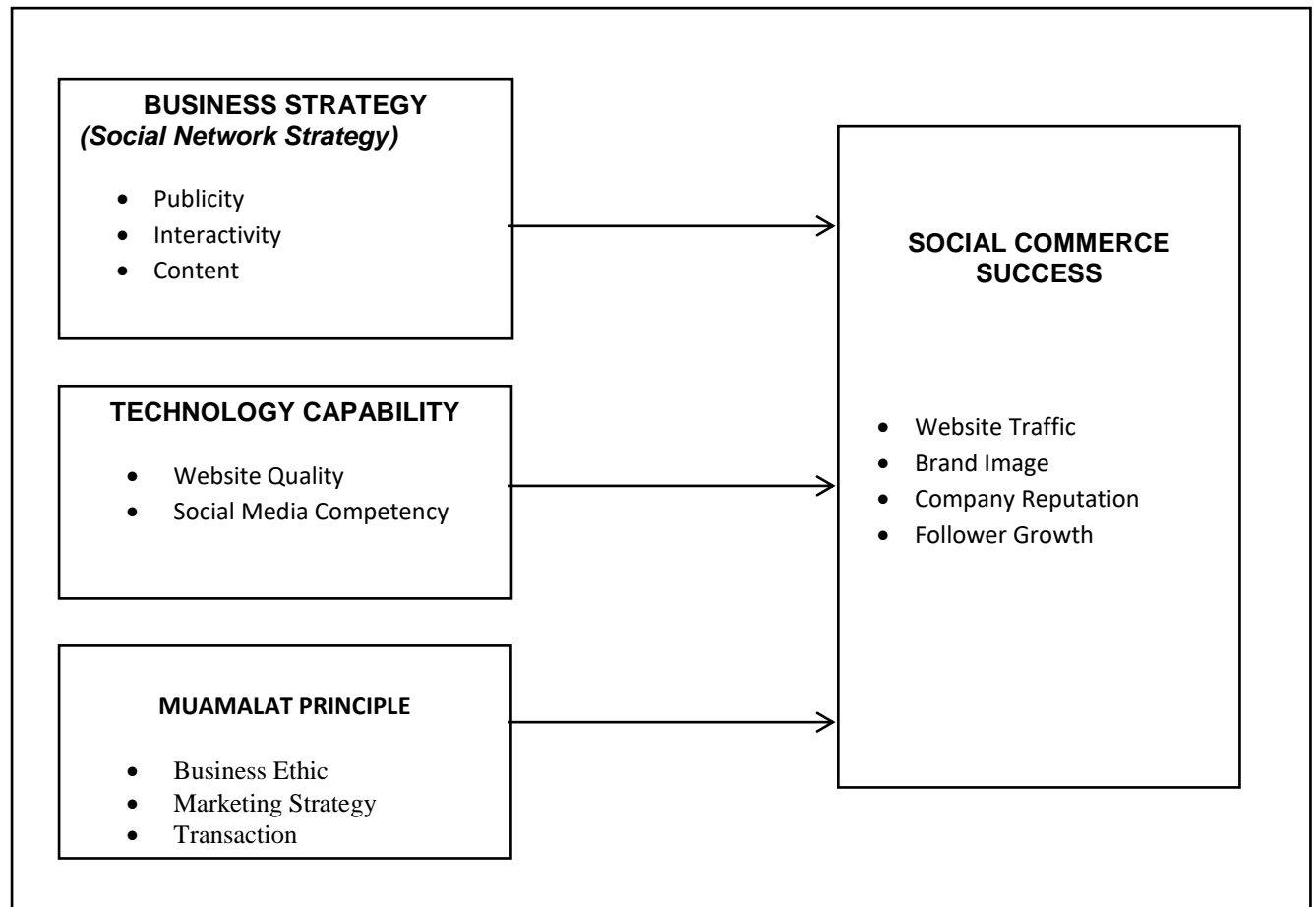
Securing transaction online must fulfill two main requirements. The first requirement concerns how to protect the data from the unauthorized parties (confidentiality) and the second requisite is how to guarantee the integrity of the transaction. In order to guarantee the integrity, therefore in Islam, *'aqd* is very important. *'Aqad* carries the meaning of obligations, as used in the first verse of Surah al-Maida: "*O ye who believe! Fulfill your obligation.*" (5:1). In the Islamic jurisprudence, the word contract is used to indicate an engagement and agreement between two persons in a legally accepted, impactful and binding manner.

In social commerce transaction, contract or *'aqad* can be made through mutual agreement between parties, the business operators and consumers. Zainul (2005) offered a guideline in complying to the *'aqad* process in mobile commerce, which are applicable to social commerce. i) Contract initiation (*Al – Ta'kud*) is the beginning stage of initiating the contract for both parties; buyers and sellers. The communication channel such as, mobile technologies and social media platform must be capable to link each other. The buyers have to check the status of the company to ensure the company really exists and are not fictitious. It is important to make sure all pillars of transaction are present: offer (*Ijab*), acceptance (*Qabul*), subject matter (*Mahallul 'Aqd*), and mode of expression (*Sighah*). "*O ye who believe! Fulfill your obligation*" [5:1]. ii) Verification of the contract (*Sihha*) is important to specify whether the transaction is permissible and whether it can be delivered or not. iii) Implementation (*nafath*). At this stage, two things must be confirmed. First, the buyer must ensure that the person who offers the product is the real owner and has absolute rights and authority over the product. Second, the product is free from any liabilities, iv) Binding (*ilzham*) which means nobody should pull out; if the buyer is not familiar with the new product, the seller is obliged to convince the buyer, and finally, iv) Completion (*tamam*) is the transaction of purchasing good and services. During this phase, the exchange of the money and the goods happens.

As transaction governs the exchange between social commerce seller and buyer, the business operators must be competent in all aspects of the transactions including the technology fit and well aware of the legal issues. Knowledge and practice of the Islamic Muamalat principles in business transaction by business owners should be regarded as the main concerns in order to sustain the business using social commerce.

Based on the fundamental aspects of the business management, technology capability and business social network strategy, it is believed that these business activities must be governed by the Muamalat principles of marketing and business ethics. Good intention and sincerity of the business owners are naturally apparent through these practices and the trusting relationship with the customers can be sustained for an extended period of time. Therefore, the previous discussion is illustrated by offering the following conceptual model. This model could serve as a framework in evaluating the values and the integration of the fundamental aspects of social commerce.

Figure 1: Conceptual model of social commerce success factors: The Islamic business management perspective



CONCLUSION

Social commerce will continue to evolve. With technology advancement, the name may be changed. However, regardless of the changes, one should not deviate from the Islamic conduct. This paper has put forward the discussion on how social commerce should comply with the Islamic Shariah principles for its success. It is recommended to business owners that the recipe of success in online business or social commerce is through the implementation of the Islamic Shariah or Muamalat principles. Good intention and sincerity of the business owners are naturally apparent through these practices and the trusting relationship with the customers can be sustained for an extended period of time.

Business is not about profits. But it must be conducted for the good of others. Therefore, both business and consumers must be knowledgeable, honest and sincere. Issues on the opportunity to understand more on social commerce success by applying the Muamalat principles have been discussed. The discussion will not only provide the ethical conducts of doing business to social commerce operators, but it also assists the consumers in knowing their rights. In future, it is expected that more research will be conducted to empirically evaluate the success of social commerce from the aspects of Muamalat principles, or granting an effort for developing an official guideline for social commerce Shariah compliance.

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