

UNLOCKING ACCESS TO CUSTOMER SOCIAL NETWORKS: WHAT SALES MANAGERS AND SALESPEOPLE CAN DO TO CAPITALISE ON CONSUMERS' USE OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS TO MAKE PURCHASES

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Abstract

We outline how consumers use social capital to leverage social relationships to make purchases from others in their social networks. We highlight the benefits derived from these behaviours, as well as subsequent marketing implications for decision making, satisfaction, loyalty, and WOM. We also provide practical recommendations to help marketers gain access to customer social networks, by appealing to socially connected consumers' desires for financial savings, preferential treatment, exclusive information, and emotional support. More effectively managing these influential social relationships can help firms to increase their visibility and influence in customer social networks, while also positively impacting WOM, satisfaction, and loyalty.

Keywords: relationship marketing, sales, social capital, social networks, social relationships

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1. INTRODUCTION

Relationship marketing has transformed the landscape of marketplace interactions, dramatically influencing a variety of marketing related activities. In recent years, customer relationships have become a focal point of marketing efforts, particularly with respect to selling activities designed to better meet customers' needs. Relational resources, such as the relationships that a firm's salespeople have with customers or others within their social networks, have emerged as important factors impacting outcomes for firms and for consumers (e.g., Bembenek, 2015; Rivas et al., 2015). Inherent in these relationships and interactions is the concept of social capital, which represents the resources that are available through social ties, such as information, trust, influence, cooperation, support, and goodwill (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Adler & Kwon, 2002). These relational resources are frequently leveraged, by both consumers and firms, to create marketplace benefits, contributing to the acclaim of social capital as an influential force in marketing and sales.

Effectively managing customer social capital behaviours in sales contexts, however, requires an understanding of the different types of relationships involved in making purchases, including the underlying processes shaping the interactions between exchange partners. While many studies have investigated the influence of traditional *commercial relationships* (i.e., relationships developing between buyers and sellers from ongoing exchanges) in marketplace settings (e.g., Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Gwinner et al., 1998; Verhoef, 2003; Srinivasan & Moorman, 2005; Krasnikov et al., 2009), relatively few have specifically examined the impact of *social relationships* (i.e., noncommercial relationships, such as pre-existing personal friendships between buyers and

sellers) on important marketplace outcomes (Frenzen & Davis, 1990; DiMaggio & Louch, 1998; Johnson & Ross, 2014, 2015).

As an illustration regarding what these social relationships look like in practice, including how they can be used to unlock meaningful social capital benefits in the marketplace, consider the following example¹:

Bob wants to buy a mobile video system for his SUV to offer entertainment options to passengers while on road trips. Bob reviews the offerings online and finds that there are many brands and models, as well as many retailers and installers. Deciding on a particular offering and seller seems overwhelming.

Bob remembers that his friend from his community basketball team, Wayne, works for an automotive retailer. During their next practice, Bob asks Wayne for some advice. Wayne shares his knowledge to help Bob and invites him to drop by the store to peruse some of the video systems they carry to provide him with a better sense of their different features.

Bob visits Wayne's store, where they look at various systems and discuss the options Bob prefers. They also consult with one of the installation technicians regarding which offerings are best suited for Bob's vehicle. Bob is impressed by the store's offerings, expertise, and guidance from his friend.

Together they determine the system that best meets his needs, and Bob asks about pricing. Wayne quotes the store's normal selling price, but then offers him the "friends and family" discount, which results in a price that is 20% lower than the prices Bob saw online. Moreover, Wayne assures Bob that if he purchases the system, he will ensure that one of the store's best

technicians install it. Bob realises this is a great deal and he appreciates the specialised treatment he has received. He trusts Wayne and feels confident about the service he will receive, so he makes the purchase.

Bob completes the transaction and feels very satisfied with the purchase experience. Not only did he purchase the system for less than he would have otherwise, but he also feels great about the personalised service he received. He also isn't worried about the installation because he knows Wayne will assign one of the store's best technicians to it. Bob is so appreciative that he tells his family and friends about his amazing experience. He knows that he will definitely come back to Wayne for his future automotive needs.

This example illustrates how consumers can draw upon relationships from their personal social networks to make purchases, allowing them to impact purchasing outcomes by obtaining advantages through relationships with friends. In this example, Bob was able to access information, expertise, financial savings, and preferential treatment because of his personal friendship, contributing to his feelings of confidence and trust, while also simplifying the purchasing process. The benefits Bob received subsequently influenced what he shared with others about his purchase experience, while also contributing to his future purchase intentions, demonstrating the potential that social relationships have to influence opportunities and outcomes important to salespeople, such as satisfaction, word-of-mouth, and customer loyalty.

Although these types of social relationships are sometimes overlooked by marketers, they are actually quite prevalent in the marketplace, representing as many as 1 in 4 purchases across different purchase categories (DiMaggio & Louch, 1998). Given their pervasiveness, it is remarkable that the implications of using *social relationships* to make purchases have not received more attention in marketing, specifically in the context of sales. Consequently, the absence of sales specific applications and recommendations makes it challenging for salespeople and managers to effectively identify, conceptualise, and manage these types of *social relationships*. To tackle this issue, this paper explicitly addresses how social relationships, and the customer networks that facilitate them, can be better understood and strategically managed by salespeople, sales managers, and other marketing practitioners, to improve relationship marketing practices, customer purchase experiences, and sales performance.

Accordingly, this paper has two specific and interrelated purposes. First, we draw upon the social capital framework to outline and explain how consumers utilise social relationships in the marketplace to achieve specific consumption related outcomes when making purchases. Second, we demonstrate how consumers' social network relationships and behaviours can be managed by decision makers to inform sales strategies, sales policies, and salesperson performance. Meeting these two objectives

provides salespeople and sales managers with an expanded toolkit for managing customer relationships in ways that align with how customers use social relationships in the marketplace. Providing salespeople and managers with an improved understanding regarding how consumers engage in predictable social capital behaviours, as well as providing decision makers with practical insights regarding how these behaviours can be strategically managed, constitute important contributions of this paper.

2. SOCIAL CAPITAL, SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, & ASSOCIATED CONSUMPTION OUTCOMES

2.1. The Social Capital Framework

The social capital framework addresses the interaction between social interactions and individual behaviours by focusing on outcomes obtained by individuals as a result of their relationships with others (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Adler & Kwon, 2002). Scholars have defined social capital as the resources embodied or held within relationships between individuals. These social resources can include advice, information, leads, opportunities, cooperation, influence, and support (Burt, 2000; Lin, 2001). The social capital framework addresses how these resources are accessed and used to generate benefits for individuals. This form of capital is deemed "social" because it can only be used when ties exist between individuals. Ultimately, individuals must possess relationships with others for social capital to create benefits (Coleman, 1998; Lin, 2001). From this perspective, any advantage resulting from an individual's relationships with others can be considered a return on social capital (Lin, 2001).

The most fundamental strategy used by individuals to facilitate social capital is to request favors from friends who have access to valuable resources. This approach is beneficial for a variety of reasons, as suggested by Lin (2001). First, it takes advantage of the influence that friends can exercise on other individuals to whom they are connected, affording benefits to the individual making the request. Additionally, friends oftentimes maintain many different relationships across various contexts, providing them with different perspectives, which allows them to identify or locate important resources or information not immediately visible to the individual making the request. Further, making requests from friends with different connections to others can also be advantageous when they possess superior social credentials, which can help to elevate the credentials of the individual requesting the favour.

Finally, one of the implications of using social capital is that one assumes future obligations to others who allow access to their resources (Lin, 2001). In this way, reciprocity governs the use of social capital by linking current withdrawals from social resources to future deposits. Individuals allow others access to their

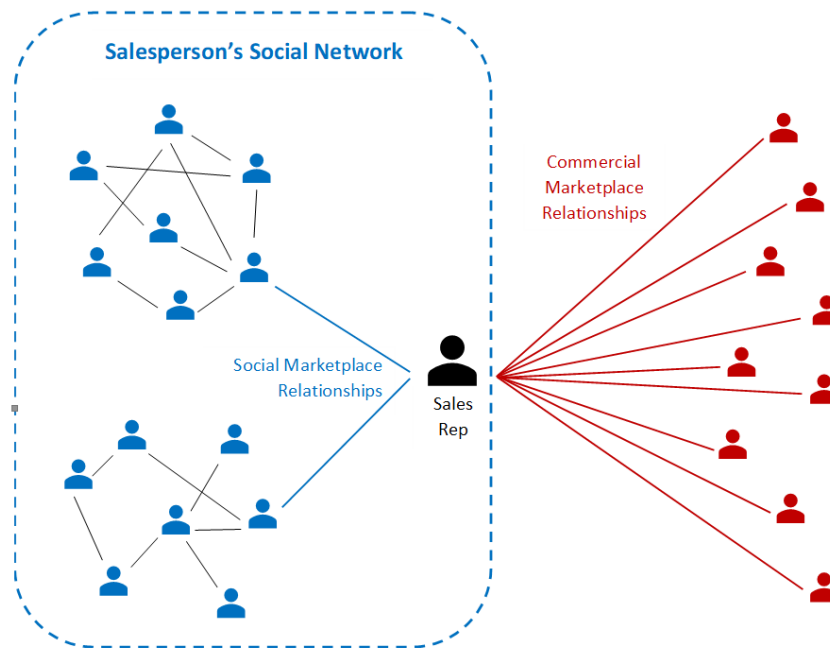
resources because doing so also subsequently entitles them access to the borrower's resources when needed.

2.2. Social Capital and Marketplace Relationships

The ability of social capital to generate benefits for individuals has been well-documented by researchers across the social sciences, improving myriad individual outcomes ranging from finding a job (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) to formulating creative ideas (Burt, 2004) to facilitating successful communication to improve

performance (Finkbeiner & Dean, 2012). Interestingly, numerous aspects of the social capital framework have also been examined in marketplace contexts, demonstrating the power of social capital to benefit individuals in consumption settings. These marketplace benefits can be derived from ongoing *commercial relationships* between customers and firm representatives. In addition, such benefits can also be created when customers draw upon pre-existing *noncommercial social relationships* with members of their social circles to make purchases (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. | Structural differences between consumers' social relationships and commercial relationships with salespeople and firm representatives



Social Capital Derived from Commercial Relationships

The influence of social capital in marketplace settings has received notable attention from marketers. To establish the benefits that result from ongoing commercial relationships between customers and firms, researchers have examined numerous relational elements influencing the development of relationships in purchasing settings. For example, the importance of commitment and trust on relationships that develop in marketplace settings has been examined (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Trio 2015). Scholars have also examined consumers' motivations to engage in commercial relationships, particularly regarding their desire to be connected and to interact with firms (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Researchers have also explored the role that relational elements, such as relationship strength and homophily (Brown & Reingen, 1987; Reingen & Kernan, 1987), play in consumers' likelihood of entering markets and making purchases (Frenzen & Davis, 1990). Marketers have also investigated ways in which commercial relationships are impacted by personal interactions between customers and firm representatives (Beaty et al., 1996). Furthermore, scholars have examined additional

elements germane to successful commercial relationships, including the role of reciprocity (Dahl et al., 2005) and relationship quality (Rindfleisch & Moorman, 2001).

Building upon these foundational elements of commercial relationships, marketers have been able to understand how relationships impact consumer experiences and outcomes. From this perspective, social capital has been linked to numerous consumer benefits over time. For example, scholars have documented how ongoing commercial relationships are linked to greater feelings of confidence and trust in firms and their representatives (e.g., Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Coulter & Coulter, 2002; Chou & Chen, 2018). In addition, researchers have also identified how commercial relationships can help consumers to save valuable resources, such as money and time (e.g., Gwinner et al., 1998; Gremler et al., 2020). Other research has also demonstrated how ongoing relationships with firms can result in customers obtaining specialised and preferential treatment from firm representatives (e.g., Simonson, 2005; Lacey et al., 2007; Gremler et al., 2020). Ongoing relationships with firms can even help consumers to reduce the complexity of making

purchase decisions (e.g., Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Gwinner et al., 1998).

As noted by these studies, the commercial relationships that develop between consumers and firms can provide consumers with access to important social capital resources, with more developed relationships potentially yielding even more impactful benefits for customers. For this reason, some social capital outcomes may become even more pronounced as the commercial relationships continue to develop over time, sometimes even approaching the “friendship” side of the relationship continuum (e.g., Belk et al., 1988; Bitner, 1995; Price & Arnould, 1999). Given the wide-ranging benefits associated with social capital resulting from commercial relationships, it is no wonder why marketers have focused on relationship marketing and strategies to more effectively managing customer relationships.

Social Capital Derived from Social Relationships

While the outcomes of establishing commercial relationships between customers and firms have been well-established, there are other influential types of marketplace relationships that also generate meaningful social capital benefits for consumers, which have received far less attention by marketers. One type of relationship that has potentially been understated in terms of its marketplace impact involves what have been referred to as prior “noncommercial” or “social” relationships (Frenzen & Davis, 1990; DiMaggio & Louch, 1998). Noncommercial or social relationships are those that begin as friendships occurring in social circles before they are used in commercial settings. In contrast to *commercial friendships*, in which certain characteristics of friendships develop as a result of ongoing commercial interactions over time (Price & Arnould, 1999), marketplace social relationships exist as friendships before they cross over into commercial contexts, which typically occurs when friends are able to provide access to sought after commercial benefits as a result of their positions as firm representatives.

Although commercial relationships have received significantly more attention from marketers, consumers’ use of social relationships to make purchases is actually quite prevalent, making them an important consideration in sales contexts (DiMaggio & Louch, 1998). Using societal trends data from the nationally representative U.S. General Social Survey (GSS), DiMaggio & Louch (1998) documented that consumers’ utilisation of “prior noncommercial relationships,” which include various types of social relationships, such as friendships and family relationships, occur quite frequently in the marketplace. Analysing GSS data, DiMaggio & Louch (1998) discovered that approximately 17% of consumers purchasing new vehicles from automotive dealerships did so by drawing on prior social ties with employees or owners of the dealerships. They also determined that consumers used prior social relationships about 25% of the time for marketplace transactions involving legal services. Similarly, DiMaggio & Louch (1998) found that

consumers drew upon prior social ties in roughly 27% of transactions involving services related to home maintenance. Moreover, they ascertained that almost 28% of homebuyers used prior social relationships with either employees or owners of the real estate agency involved in purchasing the homes. Overall, these nationally representative findings for U.S. consumers strikingly depict the prevalence of social relationships used by consumers, while also highlighting the potential impact of these types of marketplace relationships.

Given the potential for social relationships to meaningfully impact consumption, marketing researchers have recently begun to explicitly investigate the outcomes of using social relationship in the marketplace. As one of the first marketing studies to specifically examine why consumers use pre-existing relationships to make purchases, Johnson & Ross (2014) identified four main categories of benefits consumers obtain by doing so: resource preservation, knowledge acquisition, favouritism, and affective reactions. *Resource preservation* represents monetary savings, such as receiving deals and discounts, as well as time savings, such as obtaining quicker service, as a result of incorporating social relationships into purchase experiences. *Knowledge acquisition* entails gaining access to product or service information that is not readily available to regular customers, such as product failure rates, or obtaining exclusive information, such as when to make a purchase based on undisclosed information about upcoming promotions. *Favouritism* entails receiving preferential treatment, such as being moved to the front of the service queue or gaining access to exclusive service times. Finally, *affective reactions* include the increased levels of confidence, comfort, peace, and trust, that customers experience, derived from their friends’ care and concern for them, which precedes the purchase. Overall, the benefits of using social relationships for consumption are abundant, explaining why so many consumers draw upon their social relationships to make purchases.

Given the numerous positive outcomes that consumers derive from their social capital behaviours in the marketplace, it is also important to be aware of some of the indirect effects of using social relationships. Marketers have extensively studied the importance of successful product and service delivery, including how to manage outcomes or experiences that sometimes fall short (Khamitov et al., 2020). Along these lines, marketers have also recently started to examine how consumers’ use of social relationships can impact their responses to unexpected product or service failures (Johnson & Ross, 2015). When social relationships are involved in making purchases, researchers have noted that socially connected customers may be less likely to vocalise their concerns immediately, due to normative influences. With high involvement purchases, the social restraint that socially connected customers experience has the potential to impact the trust they place in friends to ensure positive outcomes, and in extreme cases, it can

potentially impact the friendship itself (Johnson & Ross, 2015). While these adverse outcomes associated with product or service failures appear to constitute a relatively small fraction of purchase experiences, being aware of them is important so that they can be properly managed and addressed by sales managers and salespeople if such situations arise.

3. SOCIAL CAPITAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SALES FORCES

3.1. Why Understanding Consumer Social Relationships Is Critical for Sales

In today's competitive marketplace, reliance upon existing sales practices may be insufficient for firms wishing to fully capitalise on customer social relationships. Incorporating a consumer social capital mindset can be

valuable for helping sales managers and salespeople gain a competitive edge. As firms continue to compete to acquire and retain customers, tapping into customers' social networks, by positioning salespeople as important and valuable resource holders, whom customers can make use of, can be a tremendous advantage. To do this successfully, however, firms and sales managers need a fundamental understanding of how consumers' use of social relationships and social networks impact important downstream aspects of sales and marketing. Understanding how social capital behaviours impact other marketing outcomes is an important component of developing policies and practices that capitalise on these behaviours. In the remainder of the paper, we outline important marketing implications of social capital behaviours (see Table 1), and we also provide research-based recommendations for developing policies to capitalise on these behaviours (see Table 2).

Table 1 | Implications for sales managers, salespeople, and sales forces resulting from consumers' use of social relationships to make purchase

Elements Impacted by Social Relationships	Marketing Implications and Considerations for Sales Managers, Salespeople, & Sales Forces
Consideration Sets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendations from social relationships can significantly narrow consumer consideration sets • Consideration sets are often reduced to products/services accessible through social relationships
Competition for Customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced consideration sets narrow purchase options to offerings available through firms with whom customers have social relationships • Using social relationships to obtain benefits can reduce customers' consideration of competitors and their offerings
Customer Satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social relationships are associated with positive affective reactions (confidence, comfort, trust, etc.) • Affective reactions drive customer satisfaction • Additional care should be taken to ensure socially connected customer expectations are met satisfactorily
Customer Loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using social relationships is tied to consumption outcomes (discounts, information, preferential treatment, etc.) • Outcomes are linked to repeat purchase behaviours for customers to continue obtaining social benefits • Reciprocity motivates socially connected consumers to engage in repeat purchases to support one another
Customer Word-of-Mouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social capital behaviours naturally facilitate WOM processes • Salespeople serve as gateways to social network resources based on the benefits they can provide access to • Salespeople facilitate WOM by providing social network members access to information, expertise, influence, and other resources available through them and their firm

Consideration Set & Competition Implications

There are several important reasons why firms and sales forces may wish to consider consumers' use of social relationships. One such reason involves the potential implications that using social relationships and social networks can have on decision making processes such as forming consideration sets. As noted in previous research, consumers incorporating social relationships into their purchases report relying on their friends' expertise and trusting that their friends' recommendations align with their best interests (Johnson & Ross, 2014). Consequently, these behaviours can have the indirect effect of

significantly narrowing consumers' consideration sets and service options to those offerings provided by the firms with whom they have social connections. In this way, the products that are considered and the delivery options available can be significantly altered by those that are accessible through the consumer's social network, ultimately altering numerous aspects of decision-making processes. This can be tremendously advantageous for firms catering to socially connected customers, because this winnowing process can significantly reduce the influence of competitors to vie for the customer's attention and business, given the confidence, assurance,

and other benefits afforded to consumers by purchasing from a trusted friend, which helps to keep the customer focused on the specific offerings available through the firms with whom they maintain social connections.

Customer Satisfaction Implications

Another reason firms and sales forces may wish to consider the implications related to how consumers use social capital involves customer satisfaction. Sales forces would do well to recognise that social relationships have the ability to positively influence customer satisfaction processes and outcomes. As noted in previous research, consumers using social relationships report experiencing a variety of positive affective reactions, such as confidence, peace of mind, comfort, and trust, when drawing upon social relationships to make purchases (Johnson & Ross, 2014). In addition to other important drivers of customer satisfaction (e.g., Maricic, 2012), these emotional responses have been extensively studied and documented in terms of their contribution to customer satisfaction processes and consequences, with positive affective responses contributing to higher levels of satisfaction (Oliver, 1993; Mano & Oliver, 1993).

While there is tremendous upside for customer satisfaction when social relationships are used by consumers, firms and sales forces should also be aware of the potential hazards that can occasionally arise when things don't go as expected. As noted previously, marketing scholars have documented several adverse outcomes of using social relationships in marketplace contexts when product or service failures arise (Johnson & Ross, 2015). Because consumers may be reluctant to complain to the friends who provide access to products and services, the potential for issues to go unresolved exists. If customers refrain from bringing such issues to the firm's attention, they can be challenging to identify and address, which can lead to unmet expectations and reduced levels of customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1993; Mano & Oliver, 1993). However, with this knowledge in hand, sales managers can strategically monitor product and service delivery in ways that are compatible with these types of transactions, to address any issues that might arise, helping to create high levels of customer satisfaction for these types of customers.

Customer Loyalty Implications

Another implication firms and sales forces may wish to consider regarding how consumers use social relationships involves customer loyalty. In addition to the established impact that customer satisfaction has on loyalty (e.g., Oliver, 1999; Kumar et al., 2013; Dutta & Singh, 2014), customers who use social relationships with friends to make purchases also receive a multitude of meaningful benefits, ranging from discounts, to inside information, to preferential treatment, which motivate them to engage in repeated transactions with the firm in order to continue obtaining such advantages. As a result, consumers drawing upon friendships to make purchases have been documented to engage in repeat purchases with those helping them to achieve positive consumption

outcomes, resulting in customer loyalty (Johnson & Ross, 2014). As an additional loyalty motivator, socially connected individuals are also bound by sturdy norms of reciprocity governing friendships (Hallpike, 1975; Laursen & Hartup, 2002; Molm, 2010; Finkbeiner & Dean, 2012), dictating that they help one another by reciprocating each other's kindness and generosity. In this particular context, socially connected customers are also highly motivated to continue transacting with their salesperson friends because reciprocating through repeat purchases can also provide benefits to the salesperson. Ultimately, as long as the purchasing outcomes between friends remains mutually beneficial, socially connected customers are likely to continue engaging with the firm over time, resulting in ongoing, long-term loyalty.

Word of Mouth Implications

The use of social relationships to make purchases has notable word of mouth (WOM) implications. Consumer social relationships constitute the connections in which social capital is embodied within social networks (Lin, 2001; Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). Accessing resources embedded within these relationships requires communication and cooperation among network members, which facilitates WOM processes (e.g., Baykal & Karaca, 2022). When socially connected consumers experience meaningful problem or need recognition, they often turn to their social networks for assistance. Understanding how socially connected consumers scan their social networks to identify connections to resource holders provides firms and sales forces with opportunities to stand out and to become more visible as resource holders to those with whom they share social ties in their own personal networks. In this way, salespeople who are part of customer friendship networks can be perceived by other network members as a gateway to valuable resources, due to the benefits they can provide access to. The more motivated network members are to share their experiences, the more likely WOM is to be shared within the network (e.g., Banyte & Gadeikiene, 2012; Trio 2015). For this reason, firms and managers should be cognisant of the impact of WOM to help customers locate the resources they seek socially.

3.2. Social Capitalising: Recommendations for Managing Social Relationships & Networks

Incorporating sales policies and practices that capitalise on the ways customers utilise their social relationships can create tremendous benefits for the firms that understand and embrace these customer behaviours. Because frontline salespeople often constitute the firm's main point of interpersonal contact with its customers, many firms would do well to entrust their salespeople with authority and control that extends beyond managing accounts, taking orders, and closing sales. In the spirit of customer relationship management (Payne & Frow, 2005; Frow & Payne, 2009), firms might consider endowing salespeople with the added flexibility needed to be better customer network managers, in order to empower them

to expand their reach beyond individual customers, to also include those in the networks they influence. Doing so can provide salespeople with the added discretion needed to truly take advantage of the predictable methods consumers use to leverage their social relationships and social networks for purchases.

Given the benefits awaiting firms that strategically accommodate consumers' use of social relationships in their sales practices, managers can be faced with the challenging task of determining specifically how this should be done. As outlined previously, understanding the implications of customer social capital behaviours, and effectively communicating these implications to salespeople, are excellent first steps. Once sales managers and salespeople understand the outcomes of consumer social capital behaviours, they are in a better position to understand how leveraging this knowledge can benefit them and their performance.

The next step is to modify or update policies and practices that afford salespeople the flexibility and discretion to

take advantage of this knowledge. For such policies to have a significant impact, they should provide meaningful ways for salespeople to increase their visibility and influence in customer social networks. By establishing and maintaining this type of network presence, salespeople will be in a better position to capitalise on their knowledge of consumer social capital and provide benefits to the firm and its influential customers.

In the following sections, we provide research-based managerial recommendations for developing policies and practices to assist firms and their salespeople in capitalising on the motivations, desires, and needs consumers have for using their social relationships to make purchases (see Table II). Given the diversity that exists between different sales contexts, some recommendations may be more applicable in certain sales situations than in others. As a result, we encourage sales managers and salespeople to judiciously consider, select, and implement the recommendations that align with their particular sales environments, circumstances, and goals.

Table 2 | Social capitalising – recommendations and approaches for managing relationships and networks for customers using social capital relationships

Recommendations	Practical Approaches for Managing Social Relationships
Target Socially Connected Consumers' Financial Motives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilise flexible pricing policies to satisfy financial motives and obtain greater access to customer social networks Empowering salespeople with more discretion over pricing can help them develop greater influence in their social networks Increases visibility and influence of the firm through WOM and other social capital related behaviours
Attend to Socially Connected Consumers' Desire for Preferential Treatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement policies that allow salespeople to grant preferential treatment to customers in their social networks Allows salespeople to enhance the firm's visibility and influence among members of their social networks Enhances credibility, trust, and goodwill between salespeople and social network members Allows salespeople to be viewed as important resource holders in the networks, to whom other members of the networks can turn for help Facilitates trust, enhanced reputation, and future purchases
Satisfy Socially Connected Consumers' Search for Exclusive Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop policies that encourage salespeople to share valuable information with those in their social networks Consumers use social relationships to attain informational advantages Providing exclusive information helps salespeople to gain greater network influence by helping and supporting network members Creates additional opportunities for subsequent sales interactions and corresponding purchases with the firm
Appeal to Socially Connected Consumers' Specific Emotional Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capitalise on the high levels of confidence, comfort, and trust customers using social relationships bring with them to the purchase Higher levels of positive affect make sales interactions more efficient and effective for salespeople and for customers Leveraging salesperson experience and expertise with social customers can be highly influential, helping to more efficiently meet customers' needs, wants, and expectations
Catalyse Socially Connected Consumers' Organic Word of Mouth Behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design policies that allow social capital behaviours to unfold naturally to supercharge WOM behaviours Network resources remain dormant until needed by network members Policies allowing salespeople to highlight resources they have access to can organically facilitate WOM and information transmission Encouraging and empowering salespeople to grant benefits to network members enhances visibility and promotes firm offerings in normal and natural ways that are consistent with friendships norms Such practices can help WOM to diffuse naturally, unlocking access to new customers and additional sales opportunities for firms

Target Socially Connected Consumers' Financial Motives

While there are various approaches for salespeople to gain greater access and influence in the networks of customers they are socially connected to, pricing policies represent an influential aspect over which sales managers tend to have ample control (Monroe & Cox, 2001; Desai & Purohit, 2004; Selcuk & Gokpinar, 2018). Given socially connected consumers' motives to use relationships to obtain deals and discounts, salespeople can leverage flexible pricing policies to obtain greater access to customer networks. Consider the differences between a salesperson who is only permitted to sell a product at a fixed price and one who is given some flexibility in setting the price. Given that many consumers use social relationships in the marketplace to intentionally seek financial savings, salespeople with discretion over pricing are able to develop greater influence in these consumer social networks, as network members are more likely to perceive them as being capable of providing monetary benefits.

Providing salespeople with additional price discretion affords them the opportunity to assess each sales situation and respond accordingly, based on the nature of the network and the connectedness of the customer. In this respect, customers with greater network influence and more potential contacts could potentially be granted greater benefits, in order to delicately and gently motivate them to influence other network members through word of mouth. While there are financial implications for firms associated with providing different levels of discounts, firms may need to conceptualise these costs from a different perspective, such as viewing such costs in the context of customer acquisition and retention. In socially connected customer contexts, the costs associated with enhancing network presence and influence can produce significant returns on investment, by directly and indirectly enhancing the effectiveness of marketing activities, such as customer acquisition, customer retention, advertising, and other promotional efforts. In this respect, it is important for firms to account for the organic positive WOM effects that are characteristic of providing discounts to customers using social connections, which subsequently create positive impressions and goodwill among members of customers' social networks.

Attend to Socially Connected Consumers' Desire for Preferential Treatment

Another way salespeople might gain greater access and influence in the networks of customers they are socially connected to is through sales policies that allow them to grant preferential treatment to customers in their networks, particularly those with extensive social influence. By strategically providing such customers with preferential treatment, such as access to exclusive products or services, enhanced or faster service, or access to special service hours, salespeople may be able to significantly enhance their visibility and influence in the network. Additionally, some forms of preferential

treatment, such as the alignment of the salesperson's and the customer's interests, as a result of the friendship, help to enhance credibility and trust between the salesperson and network members. Such credibility and trust can help to make future sales interactions more persuasive and efficient, saving customers and firms' valuable time. Given the motivations customers using social relationships have for transacting with friends, preferential treatment provides another gateway that can be used to help salespeople establish and promote themselves as valuable resource holders in the network, to whom other members of the network will feel more comfortable turning to, in order to help facilitate future purchases.

While there can be costs associated with providing some forms of preferential treatment to customers, such costs can readily be offset by the increased visibility and interest they create for firms. Similar to the influencer strategies used in contemporary social media marketing, in which products or services are provided at reduced costs to marketing influencers who maintain significant followings online, offering similar perquisites to socially connected customers can generate similar benefits by enhancing exposure to the firm's products, services, and image in the eyes of the other members of the customer's personal network. Additionally, costs can also be offset by enhancing trust and goodwill among network members, which can serve to reduce the time and effort required to deliver future offerings to them. When properly accounted for, the benefits resulting from positive influence in the salesperson's social network can more than compensate for the costs associated with gaining access and exposure in the broader network.

Satisfy Socially Connected Consumers' Search for Exclusive Information

An additional strategy that can be used by salespeople to invite greater access and influence in the networks of their socially connected customers is to implement sales practices that specifically appeal to their desire for exclusive product and purchasing information. As noted, consumers draw upon their social relationships to make purchases because doing so provides them with certain information advantages that have the power to improve their purchase outcomes and experiences. Because socially connected consumers frequently turn to their friends for advice and opinions, long before making a purchase decision, there are ample opportunities for salespeople to provide the type of information customers seek through their social relationships, to help establish themselves as experts in the network, thus creating or maintaining a positive influence among network members.

To this end, salespeople can look for opportunities to share their expertise and experience to help those in their networks obtain similar types of exclusive information that may not be readily accessible or easy to ascertain. This might include providing enhanced information about offerings, such as which products have the best track record for performance or which product is likely to work

best for a unique application, based upon the salesperson's extensive observations and experiences. Additionally, the type of information provided to socially connected consumers might also relate to inside guidance involving how or when to purchase an offering. Salespeople are often privy to seasonal fluctuations that impact inventory and promotional activities, or to upcoming sales events, which can be shared with socially connected consumers to satisfy their desire for unique, private, or exclusive information to identify optimal times to make purchases.

While there can be opportunity costs associated with providing some types of exclusive information (i.e., if a customer waits to buy a product when it is on sale, rather than paying full price immediately), there are also many types of information can be shared with consumers that do not create financial costs for firms (i.e., a salesperson shares information about products with the lowest failure rates). For information sharing that has opportunity costs, sales managers can weigh the benefits derived from gaining added influence and exposure in the consumer's network against the traditional costs of customer acquisition and retention, as well as the cost of generating an equivalent level of exposure for the firm using more traditional promotional approaches. Overall, in many cases, the exposure, influence, and goodwill created by providing socially connected consumers with the additional information they seek, which is typically disseminated naturally among other members of the network, can far outweigh the costs associated with providing the information. Finally, providing this type of information can also help to enhance credibility and trust between salespeople and socially connected customers, and eventually with other members of the customers' networks, which is addressed next.

Appeal to Socially Connected Consumers' Specific Emotional Needs

Another approach that can be implemented by salespeople to create greater access and influence in their socially connected customers' networks is to focus on creating confidence, comfort, and trust in specific ways that resonate with this category of consumers. As highlighted previously, consumers utilise social relationships in part because of the affective reactions they experience by doing so. Interestingly, some of these affective responses occur simply as a result of drawing upon an existing social relationship to make the purchases. However, some of these affective reactions are also the result of achieving additional positive outcomes during the purchase experience. For example, obtaining preferential treatment helps to reinforce and enhance the confidence and comfort that socially connected customers bring with them to the purchase experience with their friends. As another example, obtaining private information about products, or receiving purchasing information about the optimal time to purchase products, can help to further build trust between salespeople, their friends, and the firm.

In this respect, for friends to experience the benefits of being socially connected customers, salespeople must first be available and accessible to share their experience and expertise with members of their networks. In practice, this usually happens organically as friends naturally help and support one another as they navigate life events. However, some salespeople may benefit from being more attuned to such opportunities and being more proactive in looking for occasions to offer help and support in natural ways that align with their experience, expertise, and ability to help their friends solve consumption related problems.

Once opportunities to help have been identified and initiated among friends, salespeople can augment the confidence, comfort, and trust that their socially connected customers bring with them from their social encounters, by helping them achieve the consumption benefits outlined previously. This can be done by incorporating one, several, or all of the aforementioned recommendations. Whether helping friends to save money, or offering them preferential treatment perquisites, or providing them with valuable information related to meeting their consumption needs, all of these helping acts serve to bolster the affective reactions they experience when working with those from their social circles. Ultimately, enhancing these affective outcomes involving confidence and trust help to create additional value for consumers, contributing to their levels of satisfaction, thus stimulating repeat purchase behaviours, and promoting positive WOM among other members of the network.

Catalyse Socially Connected Consumers' Organic Word of Mouth Behaviours

When social connections are properly conceptualised and optimally managed, WOM processes can unfold naturally as resources embedded in social relationships are accessed, shared, and reciprocated among friends. In this respect, social capital usage constitutes a collaborative effort between friends working together to help one another accomplish specific objectives related to consumption. The resources embedded in social networks often remain dormant until they are needed by a member of the network. Since using social capital often require both parties to have some knowledge of each other's needs and each other's resources, salespeople can benefit from being more open about the resources they have access to, as well as considering how such resources might be useful in helping members of their social circles. For that reason, salespeople should look for opportunities to provide access to their resources in normal and natural ways that are consistent with friendship dynamics. Salespeople should focus on the help that they can provide to those from their social circles and look for opportunities to do so that are in line with social norms of helping one another for the sake of the relationship itself.

Ultimately, when social relationships are used to genuinely help friends in accordance with social norms, word spreads quickly throughout the friendships network

as friends interact with one another. As a result, those granting access to social resources are able to develop enhanced standing and visibility in the network. For example, friends often discuss their purchases with one another, including where and whom they purchased from, which introduces additional information about the salesperson and the firm into the network. Customers also frequently discuss deals, discounts, perquisites, and other matters related to their purchases, which creates increased awareness and visibility when the purchase is made through a member of the friendship network. As a result, the benefits socially connected consumers achieve by purchasing from friends in their network, help to naturally stimulate positive WOM among other members of the network. Over time, as information continues to diffuse throughout the network, other members of the social circle become aware of the benefits available to them through social connections to resource holders. This naturally diffusing WOM helps to promote the salesperson and the firm to other members of the network, as a direct result of the benefits consumers obtain by using their social connections, which they willingly and freely share with others. As a result, salespeople who identify opportunities to naturally provide members of their social circles with access to the types of benefits they seek can unlock access to an extensive number of potential customers, who will bring confidence and trust with them to their consumption interactions.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have examined how consumers draw upon social relationships to utilise social capital to make purchases. We have highlighted the prevalence of consumers using social relationships to make purchases in the marketplace and we have outlined their motivations and the benefits they obtain from doing so. These behaviours and the outcomes associated with them have significant implications for salespeople and firms, particularly regarding their impact on customer decision making, satisfaction, loyalty, and WOM behaviours. To assist firms and salespeople in capitalising on consumers' use of social relationships to make purchases, we have provided research-based recommendations to help better manage these types of marketplace relationships. We have proposed policies and practices designed to capitalise on consumers' rationales for using their social relationships to make purchases, specifically related to

their financial motivations, their desire for preferential treatment, their search for exclusive information, and their inclination to satisfy specific emotional needs associated with consumption. Strategically implementing these recommendations can help salespeople to develop greater exposure and influence in their social networks, while also helping them to act as catalysts in their social circles, to naturally expedite word of mouth behaviours among members of their social networks. Effectively implementing these strategies to leverage consumers' use of social relationships can help firms and salespeople to become better network relationship managers, ultimately serving to enhance customer acquisition, retention, satisfaction, loyalty, and performance.

4.1. Revisiting the TAM framework

The TAM model was developed with the understanding of technology adoption within the context of western society and thereby lacks the contextual experience of technology adoption within emerging economies such as Cameroon. Furthermore, there are cultural variations between countries, which in the TAM model were demoted to a category of secondary theoretical relevance. Individual, organisational, and national cultures all impact technology adoption, as we all know. Even though scholars have used the TAM model in various nations, including Cameroon, there is still a scarcity of qualitative studies that add to our understanding of technology adoption in this paradigm.

Here, cultural variations are essential to understand because they affect technology adoption practices. For instance, the literacy rates in Cameroon are not the same as those in the UK or the USA. Hence, adoption practices of technology may be affected by this. Further, in Cameroon, English is often a second or third language, yet learning the technology adoption model and new technologies are usually conducted in English. Had this been shown in local Cameroonian languages, different results may have been observed. The study reveals challenges with internet connectivity and IT infrastructure in Cameroon, a thing often unheard of in many western countries where the TAM model originated. These challenges affect the adoption of technology. Hence, the conceptualisation of TAM with only westernised understandings may be problematic because of cultural and resource variations.

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ⁱ This example constitutes a synthesis of consumer experiences derived from the authors' professional sales experiences and from their interactions and interviews with consumers using social relationships to make purchases.