

Social Commerce in the Restaurant Industry: Exploring the Influence of Trust, Sociability, Customer Engagement, and FOMO on Purchase Intention

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Abstract

This study develops a comprehensive conceptual framework to examine the impact of social commerce on consumers' purchase intention within Pakistan's restaurant industry. Drawing on Trust Transfer Theory and Social Exchange Theory, the research investigates how key factors—source credibility, brand trust, and sociability—influence customer engagement and, ultimately, purchase intention. The study further incorporates customer engagement as a mediating variable and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) as a moderating variable to provide a deeper understanding of consumer behavior in digital environments. With the rapid growth of internet penetration and social media usage in Pakistan, social commerce has emerged as a critical platform for interaction, information sharing, and transactional activities. This shift has transformed traditional e-commerce into a more interactive and relationship-driven ecosystem, where consumer decisions are influenced by peer interactions, reviews, and perceived credibility of information sources. The proposed model highlights the interconnected roles of trust, social interaction, and psychological triggers in shaping purchase intentions. It contributes to existing literature by integrating emerging digital constructs such as customer engagement and FOMO into the social commerce framework. From a practical perspective, the study offers valuable insights for marketers to design effective digital strategies that enhance engagement, build trust, and drive consumer decisions. However, the framework remains conceptual and requires empirical validation. Future research should employ quantitative methods to test the proposed relationships and expand applicability across industries and regions.

Keywords: Social Commerce, Sociability, Customer Engagement, Purchase Intention, Source Credibility, Brand Trust, Fear of Missing Out.

Introduction

The improvement of the Internet over the years has provided new opportunities for businesses to use it as a venue to communicate with customers and even start using it as a means to sell their products. Many businesses have started to promote and sell their services and products in this online environment (Faraoni et al., 2019; Franco & Regi, 2016; Mainardes, Souza, & Correia, 2020). This new interaction between the business and the customer led to social commerce, also referred to as social business; it is defined as e-commerce activities conducted via social media platforms (Mclachlan, 2020).

Background

Pakistan is a diverse country with a population of more than 241.49 million people as of 2023 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Having a large and diverse population, with a significant portion of it using Internet services, the country has seen its population grow in the technology and IT industry. By October 2025, 117 million users across the country had internet access, and the Internet penetration rate stood at 45 percent of the overall population (Dataportal in 2025). This increase in Internet usage has also brought a transformation in the lifestyle, which shows the current trend of living and changes in the mode of communication, and also shows that traditional businesses need to adjust to accommodate the changes (Toor, Husnain, Hussain, 2017). As the world has changed due to technology, it is crucial to understand the impact of social media platforms and how they can impact consumers. Over the past few years, Pakistan has seen an increase in the use of social media platforms. Facebook, in particular, has seen significant growth; it has been observed that the total number of users for these specific platforms is over 19 million users (Kemp, 2015). The number of Facebook users in Pakistan has exceeded 44 million users, which shows that Facebook is still the largest and most popular social media platform in the country (Statista, 2024).

People of Pakistan are fond of eating and appreciate new food items introduced to them. The hospitality industry has seen a rise in Pakistan over the last few years, while generating more than 3.8 million jobs in 2019 (Moosvi & Ali, 2022). Even with the recent pandemic, which resulted in the industry slowing down, it has risen back up and is considered one of Pakistan's fastest-growing economies. One of the leading factors for the restaurant industry to grow in Pakistan is due to the importance of the tourism industry (Moosvi & Ali, 2020).

This study examines the following relationships

- Source Credibility and Purchase Intention
- Brand Trust and Purchase Intention
- Sociability and Purchase Intention
- .

Along with this, the study looks at the following mediating and moderating effects as well.

- The mediating effect of Customer Engagement with Brand Trust, Sociability, and Source Credibility on Purchase Intention,

- The moderating effect of Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) on Customer Engagement and Purchase Intention.

Literature review

While the traditional mode of e-commerce only enabled customers to purchase products or services, social commerce has allowed customers to develop and interact with other customers and firms with the help of social media platforms. Social commerce platforms have the inherent advantage of social media when it comes to knowledge sharing (Zhao et al., 2023). It has led to e-commerce sites being a place of transaction and interaction among customers. Features like ratings, reviews, sharing opinions with other customers, and integrating social networking sites into e-commerce websites have opened new ways of information access and sharing among customers. As compared to traditional e-commerce, we see that social commerce platforms utilize relationships and knowledge to satisfy the learning desires of consumers (Sun et al., 2022). Even though there is growing research on Social commerce, we find that there is a limited understanding of how features in a social commerce environment have an effect on the purchase intention of consumers.

Key Theories and Concepts

It is generally accepted that when people interact with each other, there is a possibility of trust being developed among them. Brand trust is referred to as the level of loyalty and admiration that consumers show towards a brand and the level of faith they have in a brand's capacity to fulfil the obligations (Na et al., 2023). Trust between one entity and a target can be transferred based on the understanding of the relationship between the two (Liu et al., 2018). The interaction between two people tends to have elements of influence that are shifted from one person to another. Once a sense of trust is developed with another person, the perceived risk and uncertainties associated with it are reduced and are more facilitative towards the transaction process (Mayer et al., 1995). Several studies have explored the element of trust from the perspectives of marketing, psychology, and sociology. Mega events, which are known to the population, have an impact on the attitude of the visitors when visiting a known destination (Lee et al., 2014). From the view of marketing, trust is considered a critical predictor of a consumer's behaviour and purchase intention (Schlosser et al., 2006).

Trust transfer theory is relatively new and was proposed by Stewart in 2003. As trust can affect the cognitive ability of individuals, it is now to be considered by both the academicians and the practitioners as a critical deciding factor. Trust beliefs get transferred from one consumer with a context to another in the view of perceived entitativity (Stewart, 2003). Many studies have utilized the trust transfer theory to predict customers' shopping behaviour by arguing that trust can be transferred between contexts. Trust transfer theory is widely used in the research of establishing trust in e-commerce (Lim et al., 2006; Sia et al., 2009). Na et al. (2014) have confirmed that when consumers are influenced by comments, recommendations, etc., by others in the brand communities, their trust gets transferred and becomes brand trust. This becomes a core thing that talks about the transfer of one person's views to another. As businesses now encourage their consumers to share their experiences online, trust is developed and transferred among them. Due to the social media presence of both businesses and consumers now at a much larger scale, the brands are discussed a lot more on social media platforms. Credibility of the source, interaction among the consumers, and transfer of trust to affect the purchase intention are areas of interest for academicians

as well. Kim and Song (2020) studied the role of source credibility and the authenticity of the information shared between consumers to look at the effect on purchase intention in the restaurant setting. The study took up the trust transfer theory as its base to look at the effect respondents have on each other based on the information being shared among them.

When people interact with each other, there is some kind of exchange that takes place between them. This exchange can be in different forms: exchange of ideas, economic exchange, exchange of trust, etc. The social exchange theory talks about the social behaviour of individuals in exchanging resources, which can be tangible or intangible, and only occurs when there is a reward in return (Ap, 1992; Lambe, Wittmann, & Spekman, 2001). Due to this, when it comes to social interaction and social structure, exchange theory has remained as one of the major theoretical perspectives (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1962). In a simplified manner, social exchange talks about the reinforcement of A's behaviour towards B and how the behaviour of B reinforced A's behaviour in a contingent fashion. Both the Trust Transfer Theory (TTT) and the Social Exchange Theory (SET) have been used in this study as the backbone for developing the conceptual framework later discussed in this paper.

Model Development

Conceptual Framework

A comprehensive model is developed to examine how social commerce factors (Brand Trust, Source Credibility, and Sociability) influence purchase intention, along with the role of Customer Engagement and FOMO. Figure 1 below is the representation of the conceptual framework for this study.

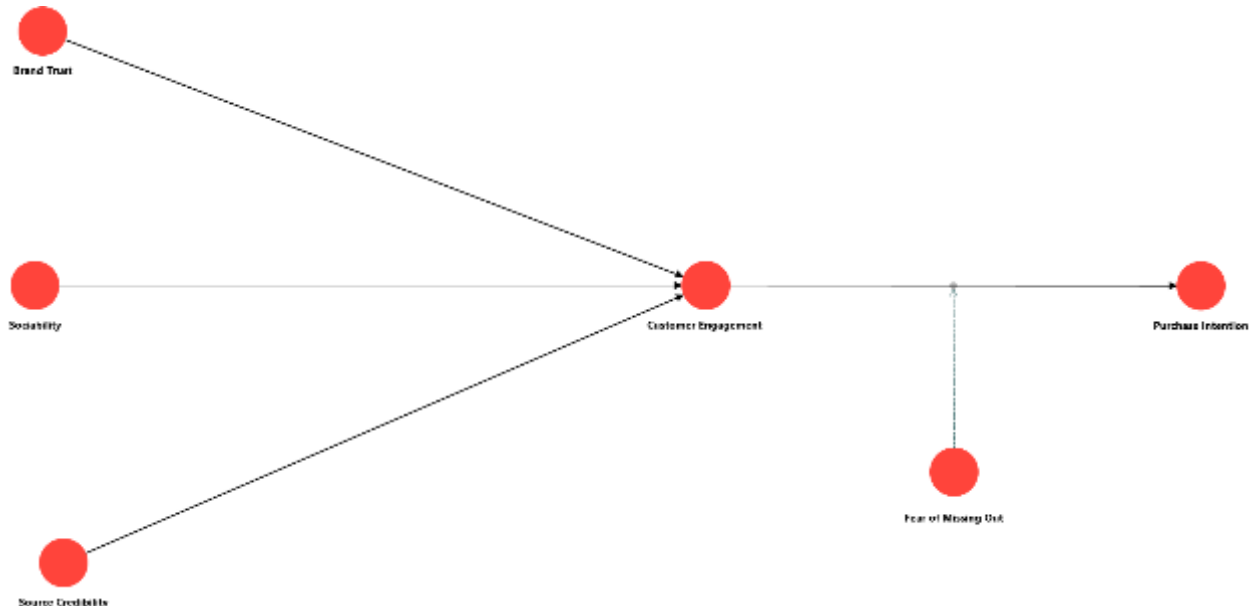


Figure 1.

Key Components and Relationships

Over the past two decades, the world has seen a considerable increase in Internet users. In 2025, the total number of Internet users worldwide was estimated to be about 6 billion (Statista, 2025). Technological improvements and the exponential growth of internet users paved the way for many social media platforms. This growth caused many businesses around the globe to shift from a brick-and-mortar setup to an e-commerce setup and move towards social commerce. Even though the use of social media and its impact on various sectors is an area of interest for academicians, most of the studies in Pakistan have focused on social media's impact on training and education (Nawaz et al., 2015; Arif & Kanwal, 2016; Hussain, 2012; Khan et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2021). It provides us with evidence that the main focus of the studies related to social media and its impact has been more tilted toward educational institutions, and they have been frequently explored here.

Social commerce has seen an interest due to the developments in Web 2.0. Firms have advanced themselves by implementing social features on their websites. Some of the standard features have transformed e-commerce sites into social commerce sites. As compared to traditional e-commerce, we see that social commerce platforms utilize relationships and knowledge to satisfy the learning desires of consumers (Sun et al., 2022). This shift has made e-commerce into a knowledge-sharing platform as well. Customers are driven to engage in social commerce for the purpose of boosting the vitality of the markets and to acquire more knowledge (He et al., 2024). This leads us to believe that trust among the users and the brand has an impact on the purchase intention of the consumers. Different studies have looked at purchase intention differently as well. For example, Liu et al. (2019) talked about the positive influence of quality of argument, social presence, and trust in a social commerce environment on purchase intention. Similarly, a study by Ng (2013) studied the effect of culture and the role of effect while looking at the relationships between purchase intention and social interactions. Akram et al. (2021) presented a model that studied hedonic and utilitarian factors while looking at the moderating effects of trust and social values on online purchase intention. Consumers on online platforms benefit from the information sharing and the social interaction that takes place. Consumers also become more aware after reading the comments, reviews, and recommendations or by electronic word of mouth (Akram et al., 2021). All the above studies point towards the fact that there is some level of impact from different factors on the purchase intention of consumers.

Another recent factor that has seen importance in studying customer interaction in the online environment is customer engagement. Several studies have emerged to talk about the use of customer engagement by companies to get a better understanding of feedback and insights. In the digital and social platforms, customer engagement has emerged as a central construct for marketing; it's not only a transactional exchange but also a non-transactional behavior like reviewing, sharing, and recommending (Srivastava et al. 2025). Engaged customers are more likely to interact frequently, share more opinions, have more brand advocacy, and adhere to the brand more (Gomez et al.; Thakur, 2019). Even though customer engagement has been studied as a mediator mostly in limited studies, studying it as a moderator still exists and provides researchers with an opportunity to investigate it. It is accepted by both practitioners and academics that engaging customers with a focus on an online setting is now part of a crucial marketing strategy (Hollebeek, 2019).

Socialization is a human need that drives them to interact with others to seek friendship and connections. Sociability drives users to explore more possibilities and develop meaningful connections among themselves (Oh et al., 2023). Consumer experience and engagement are enhanced with more social interaction that stems from being social in the digital environment. Sociability has been defined by different researchers in one way or another. Simmel (1949) defined sociability as desires, human interaction, and skills to communicate with others and form meaningful relationships. Zhang et al. (2019) describe it as an individual's capability to build relationships with strangers and communicate with them.

Social media has become a contemporary part of everyone's life, now significantly changing the behavior, social interactions, and beliefs of individuals. It's not just limited to users only; organizations have seen it become an integral part of their strategies due to popular platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, which play a vital role in brand promotions (Bianchi et al., 2017). This increase in the consumption of social media has also led to a new phenomenon known as "fear of missing out." Fear of missing out has seen a lot of interest from researchers as a psychological construct that is shaping consumer behavior. With a major shift in digital trends and seeing other users following fads, we have seen a change in consumer decision-making due to factors like FOMO and aspirational mimicry (Sinh and Kiet, 2025). This fear and the perception of exclusion force users to be more proactive and are leading towards a shift in the consumers' purchase decision-making.

This study did not just explore the factors responsible for affecting Purchase Intention but also expanded the mediating effect of customer engagement on Purchase Intention. Furthermore, the moderating effect of Fear of Missing Out is also studied in detail in this study.

Theoretical Justification

Traditional modes of e-Commerce only enabled customers to purchase products or services; social commerce has allowed customers to develop and interact with other customers and firms. The advancement due to Web 2.0 has allowed users to share information and access it (Meilatinova, 2021). Purchase intention is a consumer's conscious plan to buy a product or a service, which has resulted from one's process and an evaluation of the different alternatives (Visentin et al., 2019). This process involves different factors and attributes that are associated with the product or service, which are brought into consideration by the consumer. As it has become easier for consumers to share their opinions via social media platforms, source credibility also plays a vital role. Consumers now search for the opinions of others on different social media platforms to evaluate the brand they are interested in (Jacobsen, 2018). The perceived credibility of the source or the posted review can affect the consumer's attitude (Mumuni et al., 2018). If the consumers perceive the source as credible or trustworthy, they are more likely to believe it.

Hypothesis

H1: Source credibility has a positive and significant effect on Customer Engagement toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan

It has become easier for consumers to share their opinions via social media platforms; source credibility also plays a vital role. In the world of social media, where information sharing and access to information are more expansive and easily accessible, the impact on

brands has also shifted. The perceived credibility of the source or the posted review can affect the consumer's attitude (Mumuni et al., 2018) and can lead to increased engagement for both the brands and the individuals. If the consumers perceive the source as credible or trustworthy, they are more likely to believe it and seek more information about it, leading to engagement.

H2: Brand trust has a positive and significant effect on Customer Engagement toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan.

It is generally accepted that a consumer with more trust in a brand tends to purchase more from it (Ngo & Fukuda, 2020). A particular brand on which the consumer tends to have more trust also increases the possibility of purchasing from them. The relative risk is reduced, and the positive perception develops over time with the brand. Brand trust is now a global concept, and firms tend to invest more time and resources to build it. The brand's reputation can be a deciding factor for consumers when it comes to making a purchase decision, and leads to a more positive engagement with the brand.

H2: Sociability has a positive and significant effect on Customer Engagement toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan

Sociability is a Human Trait that Makes a Person want to be with Someone

instead of being alone (Cheek and Buss, 1981). Highly sociable people tend to seek out opportunities and to engage in relationships. One of the objectives of this study is to explore the effect of highly sociable users on the level of customer engagement and how it shapes the purchase intentions of the users. To fulfil their social needs, these users engage in types of relations like retailing relationships (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999b) and online relations (Blais et al., 2008). These users are also commonly referred to as extroverts. Highly sociable users will engage in more online activities like posting comments, sharing reviews, and engaging in word of mouth for the brands. These users are also considered to be more believable and have more trustworthy words as compared to other users. Highly sociable individuals tend to be more sociable and hence are able to develop relationships and trust with other people (Spake and Meghee, 2010).

H4: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between source credibility and consumers' purchase intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan, such that the relationship becomes stronger when customer engagement is higher

H5: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between Brand Trust and consumers' purchase intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan, such that the relationship becomes stronger when customer engagement is higher.

H6: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between Sociability and consumers' purchase intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan, such that the relationship becomes stronger when customer engagement is higher.

Customer engagement is a new area of interest for researchers, which has recently seen more recognition among academicians and practitioners. The focus of studies for customer engagement has been towards the satisfaction and loyalty relationship (Thakur,

2016). The interaction between the brand and the customers is defined as customer engagement (Hollebeek, 2011). When it is referred to customer engagement, it is talking about the transactional aspect and the emotional aspect between the brand and the customer. Researchers look at customer engagement as the interaction between the brand and its customers; the higher the customer engagement, the greater the effect it has on the customer's attitude towards the brand and vice versa. In a recent study conducted by Zheng, Li, and Na (2022), customer engagement was studied as influencing purchase intention and customer acquisition from the perspective of e-tailers. The study aimed to explore how customer engagement affects consumer behaviour when related to purchase intention. It leads us to believe that customer engagement is not just related to the level of interaction between the firm and the consumer but can also affect other dimensions. Many researchers have examined customer engagement as a single dimension variable (Touni et al., 2022; Yan et al., 2023; Zehng, Li, Na, 2022) while others have looked at its sub-dimensions of customer engagement (Thakur, 2016; Thakur, 2019). Most of these studies have looked at customer engagement from either a dependent variable perspective, and few studies have looked at its mediating effect.

H7: Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) significantly moderates the relationship between Customer Engagement and consumers' Purchase Intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan, such that the relationship becomes stronger when FOMO is higher.

FOMO is an anxiety state for consumers that makes them feel left out of rewarding experiences, and it has turned out to be a critical factor in online purchasing behavior (Przybylski et al., 2013). In social media platforms, consumers get more cues towards different offers and get to observe more about what other users are doing, which can develop FOMO behavior for them. Social cues can heighten FOMO sensitivity in consumers by observing behavior in order to be felt exclusion (Bonaparte & Fabozzi, 2025). Trending products or seeing limited-time offers on a social platform can be one of the triggering factors for FOMO, making them compelled towards the purchasing action in order to imitate others (Rahmawati & Raharja, 2024). The behavior caused by FOMO towards the users' thinking and purchase intentions has been studied from different perspectives in previous literature as well. Kang et al. (2018) found in a study that FOMO amplifies the behavior of individuals as consumers become aware of the consumption patterns of others in social media. FOMO is not just limited to creating anxiety for individuals, but also leads to users having an urge to try the product so they can feel not being left out of the social norm.

Conclusion

This study proposes a comprehensive conceptual framework to examine the impact of key social commerce features—namely Source Credibility, Brand Trust, and Sociability on consumers' Purchase Intention within the restaurant industry of Pakistan. In addition to these core relationships, the study integrates Customer Engagement and Fear of Missing Out as mediators and a moderating variable, respectively, offering a more nuanced understanding of how consumer behavior is shaped in a digital and interactive environment. By combining these constructs, the framework highlights the dynamic and interconnected nature of social commerce, where trust, interaction, and information sharing collectively influence decision-making processes.

The proposed model contributes to the existing literature by extending the discussion of purchase intention beyond traditional determinants and incorporating emerging digital factors that are increasingly relevant in today's marketplace. It also emphasizes the importance of businesses to strategically leverage social media platforms, not only for communication but also for fostering engagement and building trust among consumers. From a practical standpoint, the framework offers valuable insights for marketers and practitioners seeking to design more effective digital marketing strategies that enhance customer relationships and drive sales.

However, this study is not without limitations. The relationships proposed in the framework are conceptual and have not been empirically tested, which limits the ability to generalize the findings. Additionally, the focus on the restaurant industry in Pakistan may restrict the applicability of the model to other industries or geographical contexts.

Future research should aim to empirically validate the proposed framework through quantitative methods such as surveys or experiments. Advanced analytical techniques, including Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, can be employed to test the strength and significance of relationships. Expanding the study across different sectors and regions would also enhance its generalizability and practical relevance.

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