INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES
Vol 16, Issue 8, (2026) E-ISSN: 2222-6990

Social Commerce in Emerging Markets: A Narrative Literature Review of Determinants Influencing Consumer Purchase Intentions in the Restaurant Sector in Pakistan

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DOI Link: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i8/28850
Published Date: 17 August 2026

Abstract
In the contemporary digital marketing era, social commerce has risen as a transformative business paradigm that completely redefines the boundaries of consumer engagement, community-driven communication, and organizational value creation. Moving away from traditional, product-oriented e-commerce pipelines that emphasize isolated transactions, social commerce leverages the interactive power of Web 2.0 social systems to turn digital networks into highly social-centric and customer-oriented spaces. This comprehensive narrative review explores the direct online factors, psychological variables, and environmental determinants that govern consumer purchase intentions within the high-growth hospitality and full-service restaurant industry of expanding South Asian economies, with a particular focus on Pakistan. By integrating the core tenants of Trust Transfer Theory (Stewart, 2003) and Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), this research provides a multi-dimensional framework examining the individual and collective roles of consumer sociability, brand trust, and source credibility. The literature indicates that while baseline service indicators—such as food quality, physical convenience, and competitive pricing structures—form the critical baseline of any service brand, it is the overarching mechanism of Customer Engagement that transforms passive social interactions and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) into highly definitive purchasing behaviors. Concurrently, the psychological anxiety known as the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) is evaluated as a powerful, non-linear moderator that systematically alters user risk thresholds, amplifies peer-imitative buying patterns, and accelerates spontaneous dining selections to preserve corporate and community belonging. Ultimately, this comprehensive evaluation highlights how active corporate social visibility, robust review infrastructure verification, and proactive consumer relationship platforms minimize digital information deficits, strengthen brand equity, and shape the financial trajectory of modern culinary organizations.
Keywords: Social Commerce, Purchase Intention, Restaurant Sector, Pakistan, Consumer Behavior, Trust, eWOM, Social Media, Digital Marketing.

Introduction and Comprehensive Background

The monumental proliferation of mobile internet technologies, unified smartphone communications, and Web 2.0 network layers over the past two decades has triggered an unprecedented evolution in the global business community. Traditional business operations, which heavily favored physical storefronts and localized marketing, have been forced into a rapid transformation toward interactive, hyper-connected digital commerce spaces (Toor, Husnain, & Hussain, 2017). This digital disruption is particularly prominent across emerging South Asian economies, where massive populations and rapid internet adoption create uniquely dynamic consumer markets. A primary example of this shift is observed within Pakistan, a demographically diverse nation with a population expanding beyond 241.49 million individuals as of late 2023 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). By the final quarters of 2025, digital access across the nation surged to encompass more than 117 million active, verified internet subscribers, lifting the national internet penetration rate to an impressive 45% of the overall population (Dataportal, 2025). This nationwide digital expansion has fundamentally altered standard communication loops, household lifestyles, and consumer behaviors, forcing local industries to immediately reconstruct their traditional marketing pathways.

Concurrently, social networking platforms have moved beyond simple entertainment tools to form the central structural framework of consumer-brand interaction. Facebook remains the clear market leader in social architecture within this market, growing exponentially from a domestic user base of 19 million in the mid-2010s (Kemp, 2015) to exceeding 52.9 million active profiles by 2025 (Statista, 2025). This massive digital reach provides a powerful infrastructure for corporate brand propagation, while giving rise to large, organic, consumer-led community ecosystems. Within regional urban centers, highly specialized lifestyle and food forums have experienced immense growth. Dedicated culinary discussion networks in the metropolitan hub of Karachi have reached more than 609,000 active members, while corresponding peer-review groups in the capital city of Islamabad command over 134,000 active participants. These online communities are completely dedicated to crowd-sourced feedback, customer service reviews, and organic electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) distributions, offering an optimal environment to evaluate how specific online interaction variables change consumer mindset and corporate brand equity.

The broader economic backdrop of this social commerce transition is anchored heavily within the hospitality and full-service restaurant industry, which is recognized as one of the fastest-growing sectors within the national economy. Valued globally at an estimated $1.51 trillion in 2023 and projected to reach a market valuation of $1.91 trillion by the end of 2033 (Futuremarketinsights, 2023), the restaurant market in Pakistan reflects similarly robust financial trends. Generating an estimated annual revenue exceeding 134 billion PKR and employing significant segments of the industrial manufacturing and tourism labor forces (Moosvi & Ali, 2022), dining out has evolved from an exclusive celebratory activity into a standard mainstream leisure choice and a primary avenue for social aggregation (Sharif, Jamil, & Nasir, 2017). Paired with digital technologies, social media platforms have provided modern consumers with the exact information infrastructure required to navigate these expanded dining choices.

Historically, the primary focus of restaurant management was tightly restricted to balancing core product quality against local pricing models, which directly dictated short-term customer satisfaction metrics (Khan et al., 2020). However, the sudden arrival of the global COVID-19 pandemic and its corresponding mandatory operational closures forced a dramatic shift in this operational landscape. To survive, the majority of restaurants had to immediately downsize physical footprints and transition toward entirely new operating policies, heavily adopting a delivery-only format that required a deep reliance on digital platforms (Dawn, 2021). This transition was further accelerated by the rapid adoption of aggregated third-party mobile applications like Foodpanda, which introduced an entirely new layer of market competition and logistical challenges for independent operators (Business Recorder, 2024). In the current macroeconomic landscape, marked by rising operational costs, high inflation, and rapidly shifting consumer tastes, restaurants are facing intense pressure to market their services in a highly efficient manner. This operational stress requires promotional frameworks that maximize consumer outreach while minimizing direct capital investments. Social media platforms provide the ideal venue for this strategic optimization.

Despite the clear real-world value of social media marketing, a deep review of existing academic literature reveals a prominent gap within regional research. While social media interactions have drawn significant interest from local scholars, the vast majority of studies conducted in Pakistan remain narrowly focused on training methods, digital literacy, and educational institutional improvements (Hussain, 2012; Nawaz et al., 2015; Arif & Kanwal, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021). Conversely, research exploring online consumer purchasing behavior has been largely dependent on non-academic data sources, leaving key corporate branding elements like user sociability, message source credibility, and brand trust unexamined within high-risk service contexts (Ahmed et al., 2021). This research systematically addresses this gap by synthesizing existing literature into a cohesive, ten-page narrative review, establishing a clear academic starting point for future research into digital hospitality marketing.

Theoretical Foundations

To establish a rigorous conceptual baseline for analyzing the online variables that govern social commerce, this review integrates two prominent academic frameworks: Trust Transfer Theory and Social Exchange Theory. Together, these complementary lenses clarify how cognitive trust transfers across digital boundaries and how relational exchanges govern human interaction within social media networks.

Trust Transfer Theory

Initially detailed by Stewart (2003), Trust Transfer Theory outlines the precise cognitive process through which a trustor's established trust toward a specific source, context, or entity can be systematically transferred to a new, associated target entity based on the perceived relationship between them (Stewart, 2003). In online marketplace settings, this theory serves as a foundational building block for explaining how independent community networks validate corporate reputations (Lim et al., 2006; Pavlou & Gefen, 2004; Sia et al., 2009). Because intangible service purchases like full-service restaurant dining are marked by high experiential risk and a lack of immediate physical evaluation, consumers experience notable pre-purchase anxiety. To reduce this perceived uncertainty, individuals look to trusted digital platforms, expert reviewers, or peer networks for validation.

When consumers browse positive recommendations, transparent peer feedback, or active customer interactions within a structured online food community, their established trust toward that platform or community sub-group is transferred to the discussed corporate entity (Na et al., 2014). This cognitive transfer successfully bridges the gap between consumer and corporation, embedding brand trust into the user's perception and lowering overall transaction anxieties (Lu et al., 2016). Therefore, trust transfer theory shows that positive electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) does not exist in isolation; instead, it acts as a primary vehicle for moving trust from the community layer down to specific commercial brands, directly driving positive purchasing decisions (Liu et al., 2019).

Social Exchange Theory

While Trust Transfer Theory addresses the cognitive migration of trust, Social Exchange Theory explains the behavioral rules governing multi-directional user interactions. Developed extensively by Homans (1961), Blau (1964), and Emerson (1972), this theory asserts that all human social processes are driven by a continuous cost-benefit analysis where participants exchange resources to maximize mutual rewards (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964). Importantly, these resources are not limited to clear financial or economic assets; instead, they frequently encompass intangible psychological resources, including social praise, personal validation, shared experiences, and emotional safety (Lambe, Wittmann, & Spekman, 2001).

In modern social commerce systems, user activities extend far beyond simple transactional purchasing. Instead, online communities function as complex relational networks where users share detailed reviews and emotional content in anticipation of community engagement, information access, and social inclusion (Cahigas et al., 2022). This structural configuration explains why successful digital platforms eventually shift from purely economic transaction spaces into deep social exchange spaces (Cropanzano et al., 2017). By utilizing Social Exchange Theory, researchers can evaluate how online behaviors emerge not from isolated choice loops, but from a collaborative environment of shared validation. This baseline clarifies how customer engagement channels, community-led communications, and psychological anxieties like FoMO interact to shape modern transactional outcomes (Ahmed et al., 2023).

Structural Shift: E-Commerce vs. Social Commerce

The academic literature highlights a sharp structural shift from traditional e-commerce designs to contemporary social commerce frameworks, changing how businesses approach direct marketing and manage customer relationships. Traditional e-commerce platforms were engineered primarily to maximize transactional efficiency, providing clear search interfaces, structured indexing, and one-click purchasing paths to streamline the checkout process (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). While this setup optimized the speed of commercial exchanges, it treated the consumer as an isolated actor, ignoring the social dimensions of shopping behavior.

Conversely, social commerce integrates Web 2.0 interactive technologies directly into commercial spaces, turning electronic storefronts into highly collaborative environments (Kim & Srivastava, 2007). In this updated setup, the core business objective shifts from simple transaction management to long-term community cultivation and multi-directional relationship building (Busalim & Hussin, 2016). Social commerce platforms utilize user-generated content, open discussion forums, peer-reviewed ratings, and integrated social tools to provide transparent, multi-layered information access (Meilatinova, 2021). Consequently, consumers are no longer passive targets of corporate advertising; instead, they function as active co-creators of brand equity, sharing real-time reviews and personal experiences that directly influence the purchasing choices of fellow community members (Ellahi & Bokhari, 2013). This transition shifts the center of gravity in digital marketing from product-oriented metrics to highly customer-centric models.

Operational Dimension	Traditional E-Commerce Architecture	Social Commerce Framework
Primary Orientation	Strictly product-oriented; engineered to maximize transactional throughput and operational speed (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013).	Deeply customer-oriented; focused on relationship building, continuous community networking, and mutual value creation (Busalim & Hussin, 2016).
Core Mechanics	Static digital product catalogs, automated keyword searches, and linear transactional pathways.	User-generated content streams, open discussion forums, crowd-sourced peer ratings, and social networks (Meilatinova, 2021).
Information Flow	Unidirectional; structured corporate marketing broadcasts targeting isolated individual consumers.	Multi-directional & Networked; continuous peer-to-peer discussions where users act as consumer and promoter (Busalim & Hussin, 2016).
Trust Generation	Derived entirely from formal financial transaction security encryptions and static institutional branding.	Cultivated organically through transparent peer verification, independent user reviews, and active community interactions (Hajli, 2015).

Key Strategic Determinants of Consumer Behavior

To properly diagnose the factors driving modern consumer behavior within social commerce networks, this review categorizes overlapping system characteristics and user traits into three core determinants: Brand Trust, Source Credibility, and Sociability.

Brand Trust

Brand trust represents the consumer's baseline psychological willingness to confidently rely on an organization's structural capability to perform its stated service function efficiently (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Within high-contact service contexts like full-service dining, establishing brand trust is exceptionally critical because the core offering is highly experiential and cannot be verified prior to actual consumption. As a result, safety standards, ingredient hygiene, service consistency, and physical environment act as vital components in consumer calculations (Lassoued & Hobbs, 2015; Tonkin et al., 2016). Brand trust is developed dynamically over time through a combination of individual direct encounters and continuous exposure to community-vouched peer data (Atulkar, 2019).

When an organization establishes a clear, visible track record of fulfilling its core service promises within social commerce networks, consumers experience lower overall risk perceptions and a significant drop in purchase hesitation (Park & Kim, 2016). This psychological buffer is highly valuable during economic downturns, helping organizations maintain structural stability by fostering long-term brand loyalty (Chinomona, 2014). Ultimately, brand trust acts as a strategic operational anchor that turns casual platform visitors into repeat customers, supporting long-term commercial performance.

Source Credibility

Source credibility details the exact extent to which an online message recipient evaluates shared information or a reviewer's opinion as genuinely honest, expert, and believable (Wathen & Burkell, 2002; Filieri, 2016). Given the relative ease with which any internet user can post public reviews, digital marketplaces face notable information noise and potential review manipulation, making source verification highly critical for effective persuasion (Sharma & Aggarwal, 2019). Message recipients systematically interpret credibility across three distinct analytical layers: the individual source's identity, the message structural layout, and the overall reliability of the hosting media platform (Lo & Yao, 2019).

Highly credible online sources drastically reduce consumer risk perceptions by resolving online information deficits (Ismagilova et al., 2020). When a reviewer is perceived as highly objective, independent, and free from corporate bias, their content carries much greater persuasive weight, directly shifting consumer attitudes and driving final dining selections (Petty & Cacioppo, 2012; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Consequently, managing and highlighting authentic, high-credibility user review networks serves as an essential mechanism for transforming general online visibility into definitive purchase choices.

Sociability

Sociability is defined as an individual's intrinsic psychological trait, skill set, and desire to seek out interpersonal connections, develop friendships, and participate in interactive social settings rather than remaining isolated (Cheek & Buss, 1981). In digital environments, this core personality trait plays an essential role in dictating how users manage and project their digital personas across social networks (Lee et al., 2024). Highly sociable individuals show a significantly higher propensity to participate in collective consumption, initiate public discussions, and actively seek out social shopping experiences (Dhaundiyal & Coughlan, 2016; Zhang et al., 2019).

This core behavioral drive transforms standard platform usage into active community participation. Highly sociable users regularly share emotional reactions, post detailed comments, and generate the extensive peer feedback loops that form the foundation of social commerce ecosystems (Vaiciukynaite & Gatautis, 2018). In environments lacking physical contact, like digital commerce, user sociability serves as a vital fuel for platform interactivity, translating passive system features into lively community spaces that directly influence broader purchasing choices.

The Catalysts: Engagement and Moderation

The relationship between these foundational core determinants and final purchase intentions is activated through two key operational mechanisms: customer engagement and the psychological moderator of Fear of Missing Out.

Customer Engagement as a Mediating Catalyst

Customer engagement represents a consumer's motivation-driven, non-transactional behavioral manifestation toward a corporate brand, extending far beyond routine purchase actions (Doorn et al., 2010; Kumar & Pansari, 2016). It functions as a critical mediating variable that converts baseline brand trust, source credibility, and user sociability into definitive consumer actions. Modern social commerce platforms facilitate this process by shifting interaction spaces away from one-way corporate broadcasts into collaborative digital environments (Sawhney et al., 2005). Active engagement metrics—such as likes, user comments, and shared content—allow consumers to co-create brand value, deep emotional attachments, and strong advocacy behaviors (Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Vivek et al., 2018). Consequently, higher brand engagement creates a psychological buffer that reduces risk perceptions, reinforces brand trust, and directly drives repeat purchase intentions (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Prentice et al., 2019).

Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) as a Moderator

Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) functions as a powerful psychological moderator within modern social commerce, defined as a pervasive state of anxiety caused by the perception that others are enjoying rewarding experiences from which one is excluded (Przybylski et al., 2013). Social media platforms naturally intensify these comparison anxieties by continuously exposing users to attractive lifestyle highlights and social successes (Reer et al., 2019; Pang, 2021). Within consumer psychology, high FoMO levels weaken standard behavioral self-controls and accelerate the reliance on external social validation cues (Phuong, Tuan, & Khao, 2025). Marketers leverage this operational pressure through limited-time promotions, trending product showcases, and time-sensitive offers to trigger consumer urgency (Nurmalasari et al., 2024). Consequently, FoMO can bypass deliberate alternative evaluations, driving consumers toward imitative buying habits, spontaneous purchasing trends, and impulse transactions simply to maintain social belonging (Zhu et al., 2023; Rahmawati & Raharja, 2024).

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

This comprehensive literature review demonstrates that social commerce represents an invaluable o asset for modern service industries, providing organizations with a low-cost mechanism to achieve consumer outreach, cultivate long-term brand equity, and reduce online information deficits. The integration of Brand Trust, Source Credibility, and Sociability—mediated through structured Customer Engagement and moderated by Fear of Missing Out—creates a framework for interpreting digital purchase intentions within expanding hospitality sectors.

While this review provides useful insights, certain contextual limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data discussed are primarily drawn from social commerce activities on established networks like Facebook, which may not fully reflect consumer behavior patterns emerging on highly visual, short-form video networks such as TikTok or Instagram Reels. Second, the geographical focus is centered on urban consumer bases within a developing economy, meaning the results may vary when applied to markets with different levels of economic stability or technological infrastructure.

To address these gaps and further advance the academic field, future research should prioritize the more key areas like Investigate the role of other industries that are gaining popularity like hospitality and tourism. Also future research should conduct empirical, multi city quantitative modeling to validate the specific behavioral impact of various formats across diverse socioeconomic classes. Also future researchers should examine the psychological boundaries of FoMO-driven marketing to identify thresholds where urgency transitions into consumer fatigue or post-purchase regret.

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