

Moderating Role of Customer Engagement and Social Media Marketing Activities on Consumers Purchase Intention: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Social commerce has gained much popularity over the last decade due to improvements in Internet technology and Web 2.0 features. This conceptual paper examines the effect of Social Media Marketing Activities (SMMA) on purchase intention in the restaurant industry. Customer Engagement is introduced as a moderating factor which impacts purchase intention. A deductive approach and purposive sampling technique was used in this study. This study contributes to current theory by adding Customer Engagement and Social Media Marketing Activities as a moderator between Purchase Intention and different Independent variables. The study aims to enrich the literature covering social commerce in the restaurant industry of Pakistan and to understand the drivers of Purchase Intention in this context. The findings of the study provide insights into how Social Media Marketing Activities and Customer Engagement influence the purchase intentions of consumers. From a practical perspective, this study helps businesses with developing better marketing strategies in order to elevate the use of social commerce, social media and social media marketing activities in order to enhance sales and drive more engagement. In conclusion, this paper highlights the complex relationships between different antecedents for Purchase intention and help provide a practical along with theoretical contribution to social commerce, digital marketing and consumer behavior research.

Keywords: Social Commerce, Social Media Marketing Activities, Customer Engagement, Purchase Intention, Source Credibility, Brand Trust, Online Reviews, Electronic Word of Mouth

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 mean 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 January 2020, 82.90 million users across the country had Internet access, and this number is thought to have increased by another 22 million between 2021 and 2022 (Dataportal in 2021). 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 the most popular social media platform in the country (Statistica, 2024)

This study examines the following relationships

- Source Credibility and Purchase Intention
- Brand Trust and Purchase Intention
- Electronic Word of Mouth and Purchase Intention
- Online Reviews and Purchase Intention.

Along with this the study looks at the following mediating effects

- Customer engagement with Brand Trust and Source Credibility on Purchase Intention, and the mediating effect of
- Social Media Marketing Activities with Electronic Word of Mouth and Online Reviews on 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. The advancement due to Web 2.0 has allowed users to share information and access it (Meilatinova, 2021). 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 up new ways of information access and sharing among customers (Meilatinova, 2021). Even though there is a 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 to be developed among them. The trust between one entity and target can be transferred based on the understanding of the relationship between the two (Liu et al., 2018). Interaction between two people tends to have elements of influence to be shifted from one person to another one. Once a sense of trust is developed with another person, the perceived risk and uncertainties associated get reduced and are more facilitating towards the transaction process (Mayer et al., 1995). A number of studies have explored the element of trust from the perspective 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 to be taken into account now 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. The 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 get influenced by comments, recommendations etc. by others in the brand communities, their trust gets transferred and becomes brand trust. This becomes a core thing which talks about the transfer of one person's views to another one.

As businesses now encourage their consumers to share their experiences online, trust is developed and transferred among them. Due to social media presence of both businesses and consumers now at a much larger scale, the brands get discussed a lot more now via E-WOM and online reviews. Credibility of the source, interaction among the consumers and transfer of trust to effect the purchase intention is an area of interests for academicians as well. Kim and Song, 2020 studied the role of source credibility and the authenticity of the information shared between the consumers to look at the effect on the purchase intention in the restaurant setting. The study took up the trust transfer theory as its base to look at the effect of respondents to have on each other based out of the information being shared among them.

Model Development

Conceptual Framework

A comprehensive model is developed in order to examine how social commerce factors (Brand Trust, Source Credibility, Electronic Word of Mouth, Online reviews) lead to have an effect on purchase intention along with the role of Customer Engagement and Social Media Marketing Activities. Figure 1 below is the representation of the conceptual framework for this study.

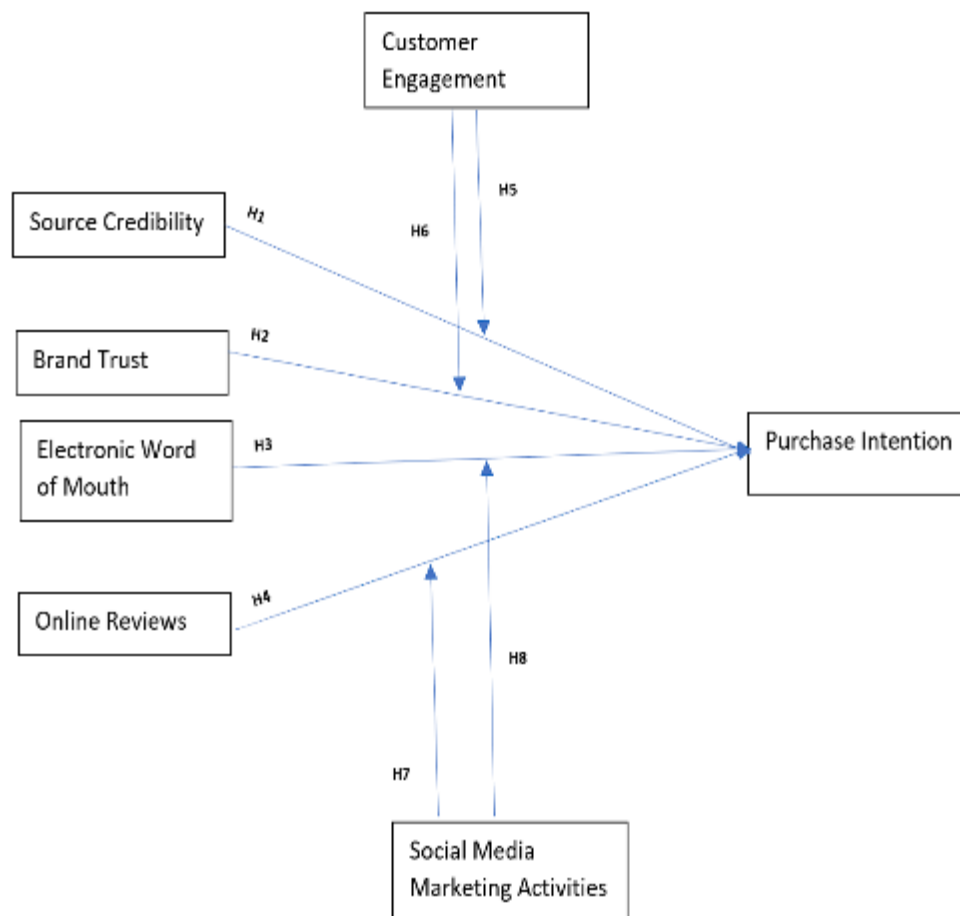


Figure 1

Key Components and Relationships

Over the past two decades, the world has seen a considerable increase in Internet users. In 2023 the total number of Internet users worldwide was estimated to be about 5.16 billion (Statisa, 2023). 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. 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 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.

Electronic word of mouth (E-WOM), purchase intention, trust, online reviews etc have been given importance by different researchers when studying e-commerce and social commerce in online platforms from the view of trust getting transferred among the respondents. A positive relationship exists between social presence, trust, and purchase intention (Lu et al., 2016). This leads us to believe that trust among the users and the brand has an impact towards the purchase intention of the consumers. Other 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, 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 these above studies point towards the fact that there is some level of impact from different factors for purchase intention of the consumers. Another recent factor that has seen importance in studying customer interaction in 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. Engaged customers are more likely to interact frequently, share more opinions, have more brand advocacy, and adhere to the brands 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 exist and provides the researchers an opportunity to look into it. It is accepted by both practitioners and academics that engaging customers with a focus in an online setting is now part of a crucial marketing strategy (Hollebeek, 2019). Even though customer engagement is being studied it needs to be explored more in depth to understand how it plays a role in the customers experience in an online environment. A study by Thakur (2019) has specifically studied the moderating role of customer engagement on Electronic word of mouth and customer loyalty. The study found that customer engagement plays a significant role in generating Electronic word of mouth which is an important product of consumers online to online communication. It was also revealed that customer engagement does play an important role towards generating EWOM for consumers but the study was limited and focused towards the usage of mobile app. This presents us the opportunity to extend the use of customer engagement towards other factors like brand trust and source credibility. A study by Khan (2022) explored the importance of social media marketing activities matter. The study focused on social media marketing activities' effect on some common marketing factors like brand experience, attitude, and Purchase intention. The study did not just explore these factors but also expanded the moderating effect of customer engagement with social media marketing activities. The result of the study showed that social media marketing activities have a strong effect on the purchase intention.

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. . Online reviews have become a popular source of information for consumers before making a purchase decision. Online reviews' role as a factor influencing consumer purchase decisions is a prominent topic in academic literature

(Sutherland et al., 2021; Simronva et al., 2020). Similar to online reviews, other factors have also become essential in determining the consumer's purchase intention. Many academicians agree now that perceived value is also one of the leading indicators of purchase intention (Brady & Swinnen, 2014; Gil-Saura & Arteaga-Moreno, 2017). These indicators, combined with electronic word of mouth, credibility, and social media marketing activities, are integral to social commerce, leading to a better understanding of Purchase Intention.

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: H1: Source credibility has a positive and significant effect on consumers' purchase intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan.

Consumers generally trust the brands they buy their products (Ngo, Fukuda, 2020). As consumers buy more from a particular brand, their trust in it also increases. The relative risks go down, and their perception of the brand increases over time. It helps consumers make easier purchase decisions without worry, as their trust in the brand is based on previous experience. A large-scale survey of 16000 consumers in different countries revealed that almost 81% of the participants had to trust the brands before making a decision (Edelman, 2019).

H2: Brand trust has a positive and significant effect on consumers' purchase intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan.

The new source of information and easier access for people have also made companies shift their resources and focus toward it. Word of mouth has been seen to affect sales for companies as well directly (Bastos, Moore, 2021). The effect of E-commerce on consumer purchase intention is a more vital element to study in today's market. With almost all consumers accessing social media platforms, sharing and accessing information is a much more common factor. The consumer decision-making process has also changed due to this new source of information for them.

H3: Electronic word of mouth has a positive and significant effect on consumers' purchase intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan

Consumers look for the opinions of other individuals and go through reviews of the product/ service before making a purchase intention. Online reviews have made this availability regarding the brands/ products/ services more accessible and easier for consumers. Online reviews have become an important information source for consumers interested in purchasing from the company (Tan et al., 2018). Online reviews interest researchers and businesses more due to the feedback they can provide about consumer thinking. These reviews can help reduce perceived risks and any concerns for the consumers before making a purchase decision. This insight helps researchers to look beyond the traditional reasoning of purchase intention.

H4: Online reviews have a positive and significant effect on consumers' purchase intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan.

Customer engagement is a new area of interest for researchers, which has recently seen more recognition among academicians and practitioners. Customer engagement is an under explored area of research which has started to see an interest by researchers in the recent years. The most 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. . The effect of customer engagement on source credibility and brand trust has not been studied yet and its focus mainly has been towards the satisfaction and the customer loyalty.

H5: Customer engagement significantly moderates 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.

H6: Customer engagement significantly moderates 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.

Social media has changed the way firms now market themselves and approach their customers. On the other hand, social media has provided customers with new and innovative ways to look for brand information and make a more informed purchase intention. Social media has now changed how consumers look at the brand's content and consumer it (Apple et al., 2020). The power of information sharing and how it can be perceived has shifted from the brands to the consumers. With the increase in social media popularity, brands now spend significant resources to have a presence on these platforms and increase their marketing activities to keep their consumers well informed). As electronic Word of mouth and online reviews are widely spread and more commonly looked for by consumers, and the brand's social media marketing activities can directly affect them.

H7: Social media marketing activities significantly moderate the relationship between online reviews and consumers' purchase intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan, such that the relationship becomes stronger when social media marketing activities are higher.

Online reviews have become a major source of information for consumers in digital purchase settings because they reduce uncertainty and help consumers evaluate products and services before making a decision. At the same time, social media marketing activities shape how consumers are exposed to, interact with, and interpret brand-related content on social media platforms. Studies have shown that social media marketing activities influence consumer perceptions and purchase intention, while social media environments also affect the way consumers engage with digital information and brand content (Yadav & Rahman, 2017; Tan et al., 2018; Appel et al., 2020; Khan, 2022). Therefore, it can be argued that when restaurants actively engage in social media marketing activities, online reviews become more visible,

interactive, and persuasive, thereby strengthening their effect on consumers' purchase intention in the social commerce context of Pakistan

H8: Social media marketing activities significantly moderate the relationship between electronic word of mouth and consumers' purchase intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan, such that the relationship becomes stronger when social media marketing activities are higher.

Electronic word of mouth is an important driver of consumer behavior in social commerce because it enables consumers to share opinions, recommendations, and experiences in digital environments. Prior studies have shown that eWOM significantly influences consumers' purchase intentions, particularly in online and social media settings, while hospitality-related research has also highlighted the importance of electronically shared opinions in shaping consumer decisions (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Litvin et al., 2008). In addition, social media marketing activities influence how consumers experience brand communication and how marketing messages are created, shared, and consumed across social platforms (Yadav & Rahman, 2017; Appel et al., 2020). Since social media marketing activities enhance the reach, visibility, and interactivity of brand-related communication, they are likely to strengthen the effect of electronic word of mouth on consumers' purchase intention toward restaurants operating through social commerce platforms in Pakistan (Khan, 2022).

Conclusion

This study proposes a comprehensive conceptual framework to examine the impact of key social commerce features—namely Source Credibility, Brand Trust, Electronic Word of Mouth, and Online Reviews—on consumers' Purchase Intention within the restaurant industry of Pakistan. In addition to these core relationships, the study integrates Customer Engagement and Social Media Marketing Activities as moderating variables, 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 for 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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