

Role of Social Commerce Constructs, Social Support, and Trust in Purchase Intention of Online Customers

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In recent years, social commerce—the fusion of e-commerce with social media platforms—has grown significantly in prominence. Given the rise of social media platforms and their influence on consumer behavior, the present study examines the influence of social commerce constructs and social support on the purchase intentions of customers. It also explores the mediating role of trust in the relationship between social commerce constructs (SCCs) and social support (SS) and purchasing intention. Data was collected using an online questionnaire distributed through popular social networking platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. The data collection was done between March 15 and April 15, 2024. The findings of the study, using structural equation modeling (SEM) technique, reveal that ratings and reviews, forums and communities, and recommendations and referrals do not exert a significant influence on trust among Indian consumers on social commerce platforms. However, the findings indicate that both informational support and emotional support significantly influence trust, suggesting that SS mechanisms play a crucial role in enhancing consumer trust on social commerce platforms. Trust emerges as a key determinant of purchase intention on social commerce platforms. Additionally, the results suggest that trust mediates the relationship between SS and purchase intention, but the mediating role of trust in the relationship between SCCs and purchase intention is found to be insignificant.

Keywords: Social Commerce Constructs, Social Support, Trust, Purchase Intention, Customers

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about several changes in people's behavior and their daily lives. Especially in marketing, social media and the Internet allow marketers a new pathway to engage with their consumers due to their faster connectivity (Sheikh et al., 2019). Consumers were forced to make purchases online after the Covid-19

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lockdown and the consequent social distancing in an effort to stop the virus from spreading. Many consumers resorted to various online shopping methods. One such phenomenon is known as social commerce. Social commerce emerged from web 2.0, and it has revolutionized e-commerce. Social commerce simply integrates social media and e-commerce websites by facilitating buy-and-sell on social networking sites (Andijani & Kang, 2022). In the Covid-19 times, Social commerce witnessed significant growth as an increasing number of consumers chose online channels as their preferred means of shopping (Elshaer et al., 2024).

Internet usage, smartphone usage, convenience of purchasing and payment, and product and service selection have all significantly increased in India. Furthermore, government initiatives aimed at promoting Digital India have led to a rise in Internet access and the popularity of social networking sites, thus facilitating social commerce (Neelankandan & Venkatesan, 2020). In India, every sector was severely affected by Covid-19, while e-commerce was the least affected. India's total Internet retail sales in 2022 stood at \$70 bn. Among the many Internet sales channels, social commerce had the greatest sales, totalling \$5 bn. Furthermore, by 2030, revenues from social commerce are likely to reach \$55 bn (Statista, 2023). Very few studies have investigated the influence of social commerce on consumers' purchase intentions. To bridge this gap, this study focuses on how the Social Commerce Constructs (SCCs) and Social Support (SS) affect purchase intention and also explores the mediating role of trust in the relationship between SCCs and SS and purchase intention.

Literature Review

Social Commerce Constructs

Recent advancements in internet technology and the evolution of social media platforms have streamlined consumer connectivity. Through various social media channels, including online forums, communities, and platforms for ratings, reviews, and recommendations, consumers engage in social interactions, collectively referred to as SCCs (Hajli, 2014). Hajli (2015) defines SCCs as social platforms that evolved from Web 2.0 and enabled consumers to generate content and share their experiences. In Hajli's (2013) model of social commerce, the following SCCs were identified: ratings and reviews, forums and communities, and referrals and recommendations. In all phases of the consumer decision-making process—need recognition, pre-purchase, purchase decision, and post-purchase—SCCs show significant influence (Neelankandan & Venkatesan, 2020).

One of the key SCCs is ratings and reviews (RR). Customers rate products based on their experiences, and reviews are their favorable or negative remarks that convey their thoughts, insights, and specifics about the products they have purchased. These ratings and reviews help other potential shoppers by providing complete information about the products. Customers' opinions about the things they have purchased are reflected in ratings and reviews, which build trust in future prospective buyers.

Online vendors develop online platforms, such as forums and communities (FC) that let companies participate in the social activities of their customers (Amblee & Bui, 2011). This is one of the most crucial elements of social commerce. Forums and communities are online venues where people congregate and communicate, exchange experiences, and provide feedback on the goods they buy. These individuals typically have like interests, viewpoints, and preferences. These platforms are utilized by consumers to obtain additional product information prior to making a purchasing choice (Hajli, 2015). By exchanging information and experiences, members of this network reassure one another, which boosts their trust and propensity to purchase (Han & Windsor, 2011). In addition to providing access to additional information, forums and communities are a useful avenue for people to exchange their experiences and knowledge, which promotes greater trust in social commerce (Shekhar & Jaidev, 2020).

The sharing of Recommendations and Referrals (RER) is another aspect of social commerce. According to Hettiarachchi et al. (2017), recommendations and referrals are personalized services or product endorsements that originate from social graph recipients. Recommendations and referrals are favorable experiences or endorsements posted by users on messaging apps or social media sites, which influence other prospective buyers. Instead of trusting the recommendations and referrals of strangers, people choose to believe those of their trusted friends, family, and peers. Companies encourage recommendations and referrals by providing awards, discounts, and other incentives. When consumers cannot physically touch, feel, or use the goods and services online, they trust recommendations and referrals (Shekhar & Jaidev, 2020).

Social Support

When someone or a group of people receives help or encouragement from others when making decisions about purchases or participating in social commerce-related activities, it is referred to as SS (Crocker and Canevello, 2008). Via social engagement on social commerce platforms, virtual communities have added value for SS (Makmor et al., 2023). Liang et al. (2011) assert that when users receive any kind of support from friends or other users on social media, they reciprocate by providing SS. The consequences of frequent stressful health occurrences, such as Covid-19, are mitigated by SS (Song & Xu, 2023). The Social Support Theory gave rise to the concept of SS. Thus, SS, in the context of social commerce, is examined in this study using the Social Support Theory. Numerous studies have looked into how SS affects consumer behavior connected to trust (Acikgoz et al., 2023).

Emotional and informational support are the two components of SS, which is based on intangible factors (Tuncer, 2021). Hajli (2015) claims that emotional support consists of elements like empathy, love, understanding, bravery, and listening that users of social media platforms receive from other users in the community. The concept of emotional support pertains to a person's perception of belongingness and familiarity with other

online users, as well as their confidence in them to take care of and love them (Sheikh et al., 2019). Customer trust will increase if they receive great emotional support from peers during difficult times (Yang, 2021).

According to Hajli (2015), informational support is more related to helpful and practical support, such as suggestions, comments, guidance, and advice given to customers by their peers. Informational support can help consumers find fresh perspectives and solutions to their issues, and ultimately make easier purchasing decisions (Liang et al., 2011). Informational support is defined as giving counsel and information that might be useful to another member of the virtual group (Sheikh et al., 2019). Information support significantly influences customer trust in social commerce (Burhanudin et al., 2023).

Trust

Corritore et al. (2003) define trust as consumers' assurance and expectation that organizations will not exploit the unique characteristics of online environments for their own profit, and that these companies are trustworthy, honest, fair, and loyal to their clients. When making purchases on social media, customers may place a higher value on an individual product's trust than on the social media platform (Um, 2019). Compared to other forms of e-commerce, trust is particularly significant in the context of social commerce because SNSs are utilized as primary information and experience sharing sources (Kim & Park, 2013). En et al. (2021) discovered that buying intention (BI) in social commerce is significantly influenced by trust.

Objective

The following are the objectives of the study:

- To investigate the key constructs of social commerce that influence trust and purchase intention;
- To examine the role of SS in shaping consumer trust and their purchase behavior on social commerce platforms; and
- To assess the mediating role of trust between SCCs and SS and purchase intention.

Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

Based on literature review, we propose the conceptual model (Figure 1) and hypotheses.

H₁: Ratings and reviews significantly influence consumer trust

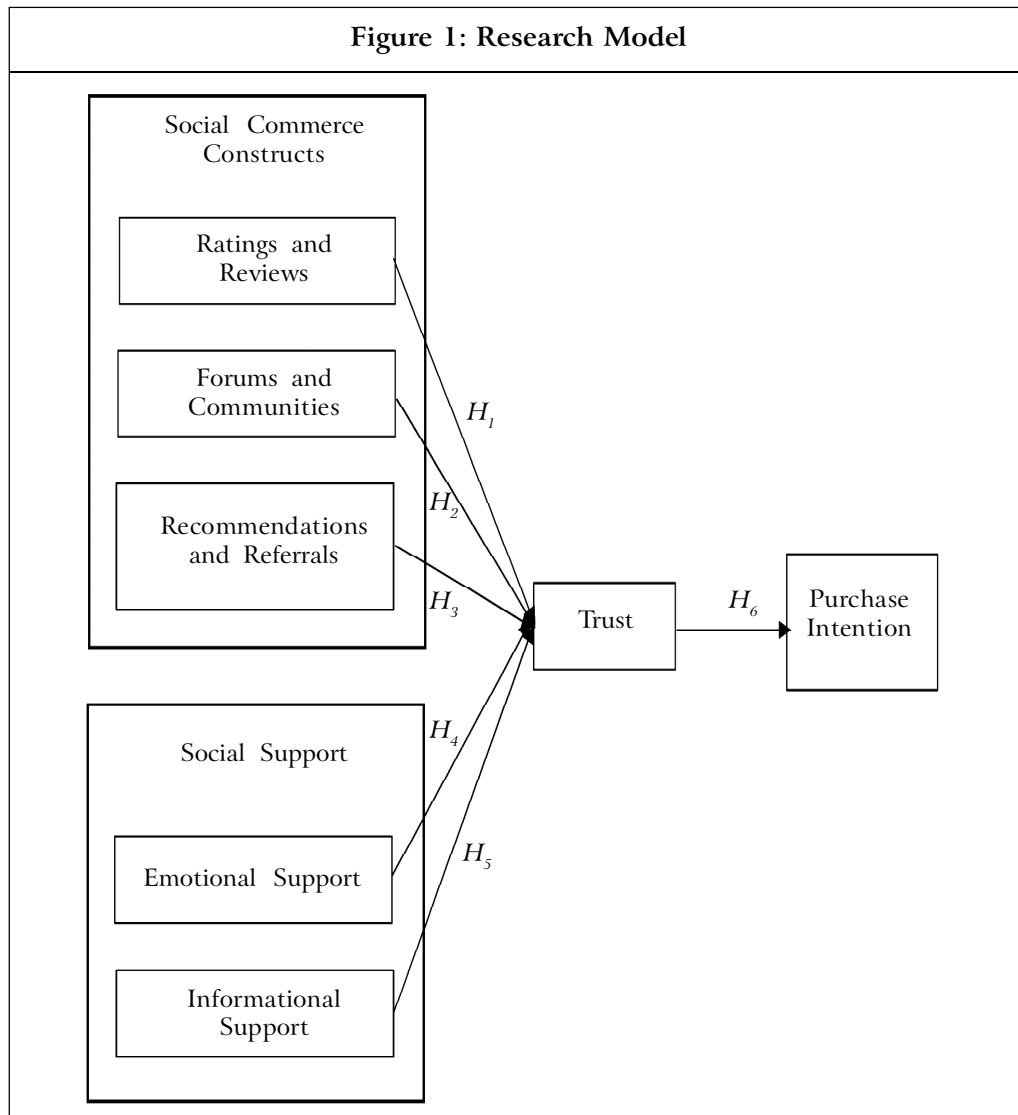
H₂: Forums and communities significantly influence consumer trust

H₃: Recommendations and referrals significantly influence consumer trust

H₄: Emotional support significantly influences consumer trust

H₅: Informational support significantly influences consumer trust

H₆: Trust significantly influences purchase intention



Data and Methodology

The study's research design was cross-sectional, examining consumer behavior during the post-pandemic period. This is a survey-based study that gathered customer data using a questionnaire (see Appendix). The target audience was defined as Indian social commerce users aged 18 and above. The study used a conceptual model to examine the relationship between independent variables and dependent variables. SCC, SS, and trust are independent variables, and purchase intention is a dependent variable.

Sampling and Data Collection

Snowball sampling method was used for selecting samples. The study collected primary data through an online survey of social commerce users in India. Google Forms was used

as an online survey tool to create and distribute self-administrated questionnaires. The survey was distributed to the target population through popular social networking platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Only those who answered “yes” to the qualifying question about having made any purchases through social commerce were eligible to take the survey. The questionnaire is divided into two sections: the first section asks about the participant’s demographics and social media usage, while the second section contains the study’s constructs. The data collection was done between March 15 and April 15, 2024. Two hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed to participants through social networking sites; 136 items were received with a response rate of 54%, and 102 items were valid and usable for empirical analysis.

Measurement Development

The measurement items in the survey questionnaire were designed based on previous literature studies. This study consists of seven constructs used to measure variables such as SCCs, SS, trust, and purchase intention. SCCs include three dimensions, namely, ratings and reviews, forums and communities, and recommendations and referrals. Each construct consists of four items or statements, which were adapted from Hajli (2015). SS consists of two concepts: emotional support (4 items) and informational support (3 items), drawing from Social Support Theory. and these items are adapted from Alshawawreh (2020). Trust is another construct adapted from Hajli et al. (2017), and Gefen et al. (2003), and it consists of four items. And lastly, purchase intention is adapted from Wang and Yu (2017) and Hajli et al. (2017), and it consists of 3 items. All the items were rated on five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree = 1 to Strongly Agree = 5.

Data Analysis

The data was examined using SPSS 26 Version and Smart PLS 4.0, with structural equation modeling (SEM) technique. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze demographic characteristics. Factor analysis, validity, and reliability tests were carried out prior to the data’s SEM testing. Smart PLS has been utilized in several studies to evaluate and validate structural models. Because it can operate with small sample sizes and does not require normality correction, PLS-SEM is a useful tool for survey-based research (Kumar & Sharma, 2019).

Results

Respondents’ Profile

The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1. A significant percentage of participants were females accounting for 54.9% of the total sample. Furthermore, a significant portion of the respondents fell within the age range of 18 to 25 years (41.29%). In terms of educational background, a majority of participants reported having completed postgraduation (45%). Additionally, a vast majority of respondents (53.9%) reported that they spend between 3 to 5 hours a day on social media platforms.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile			
Variable	Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	46	45.1
	Female	56	54.9
Age	18-25	42	41.2
	26-35	32	31.4
	36-45	20	19.6
	Above 46	8	7.8
Education	High school	8	7.8
	Undergraduate	36	35.3
	Postgraduate	46	45.1
	Others	12	11.8
Daily Usage of Social media	Less than 3 hours	30	29.4
	3-5 hours	55	53.9
	Above 5 hours	17	16.7

Measurement Model

The results of the measurement model are shown in Table 2. Factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) were used to test and determine the internal consistency and reliability of the proposed model. Factor loadings were used to measure the strength of relationships between indicators and latent variables. Factor loadings of values above 0.70 are acceptable (Hair et al., 2010). Here, all the factor loading values are higher than 0.70, which means all the indicators related to the latent variable. Cronbach's value above 0.70 is generally acceptable (Hair et al., 2010). Table 2 shows that all Cronbach's alpha values are higher than 0.70. The acceptable value of composite reliability is above 0.80 (Henseler et al., 2009), and in this case, all the constructs have above 0.80 reliability. The convergent validity was tested with Average Variance Extracted (AVE). AVE must be above 0.50, and Table 2 shows that convergence validity is also met. The discriminant validity of constructs is checked by Fornell and Larcker criteria to ensure that each construct is different from the others. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the square root of AVE must be higher than the intercorrelation between other constructs. Table 3 shows that discriminant validity was also achieved.

Table 2: Measurement Model					
Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Ratings and Reviews (RR)	RR_1	0.768	0.802	0.812	0.628
	RR_2	0.866			
	RR_3	0.809			
	RR_4	0.721			
Forums and Communities (FC)	FC_1	0.800	0.845	0.849	0.682
	FC_2	0.837			
	FC_3	0.836			
	FC_4	0.829			
Recommendations and Referrals (RER)	RER_1	0.776	0.882	0.898	0.738
	RER_2	0.885			
	RER_3	0.894			
	RER_4	0.875			
Informational Support (IS)	IS_1	0.817	0.829	0.846	0.744
	IS_2	0.874			
	IS_3	0.896			
Emotional Support (ES)	ES_1	0.847	0.879	0.886	0.734
	ES_2	0.864			
	ES_3	0.838			
	ES_4	0.876			
Trust (TR)	TR_1	0.869	0.897	0.898	0.765
	TR_2	0.867			
	TR_3	0.895			
	TR_4	0.865			
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI_1	0.847	0.807	0.810	0.722
	PI_2	0.875			
	PI_3	0.827			

Table 3: Discriminant Validity							
	ES	FC	IS	PI	RER	RR	TR
ES	0.856						
FC	0.726	0.826					
IS	0.752	0.711	0.863				
PI	0.688	0.628	0.644	0.850			
RER	0.670	0.759	0.617	0.649	0.859		
RR	0.730	0.823	0.652	0.679	0.792	0.793	
TR	0.786	0.721	0.733	0.704	0.660	0.706	0.874

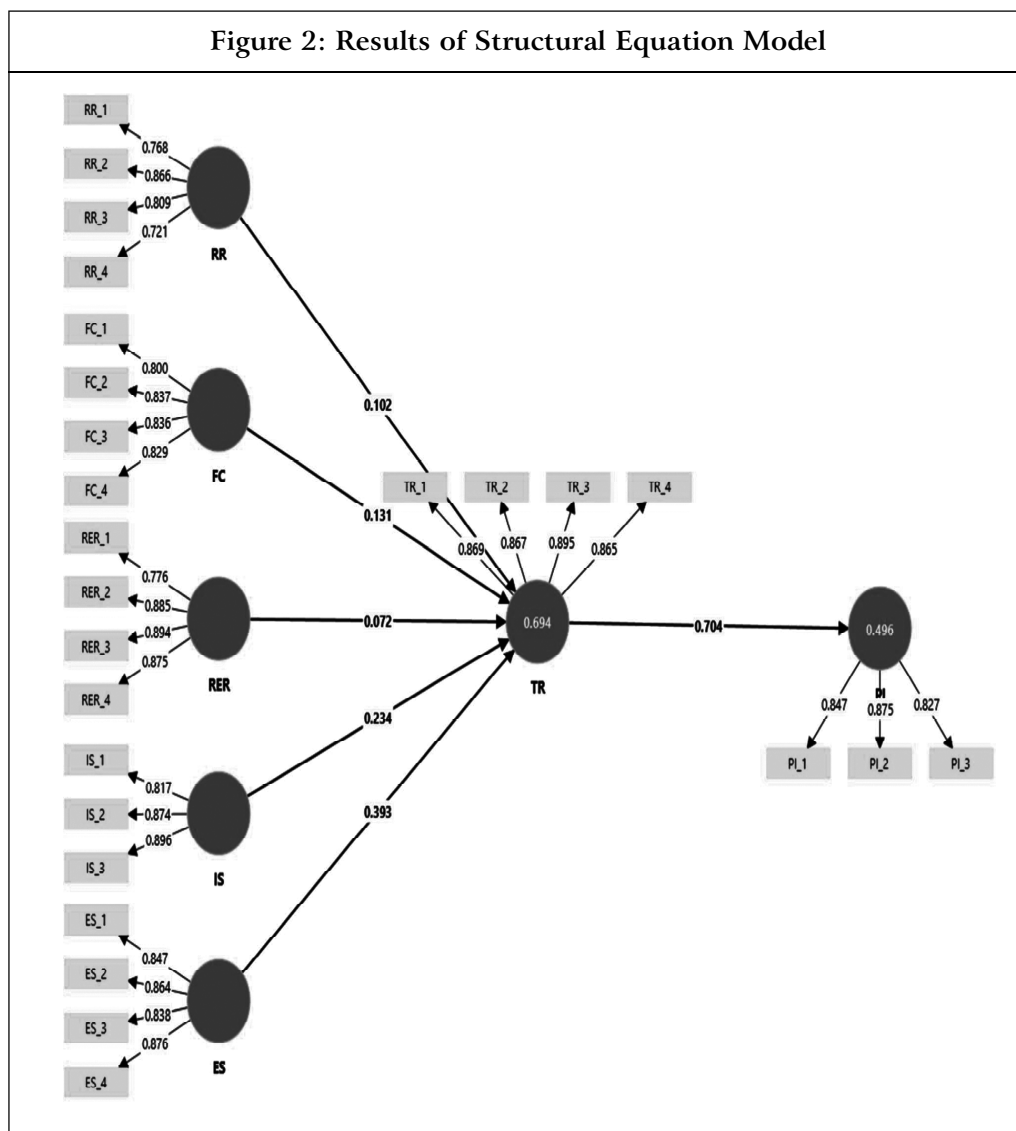
Structural Equation Model

The significance of the pathway was evaluated using the partial least squares (PLS) algorithm and subsequently verified through bootstrapping with a 5000-sample process (Rahaman et al., 2022). The structural model and hypotheses tested are detailed in Table 4, while their graphical representation is depicted in Figure 2. The results indicate that ratings and reviews ($\beta = 0.102$, $p > 0.05$), forums and communities ($\beta = 0.131$, $p > 0.05$), and recommendations and referrals ($\beta = 0.072$, $p > 0.05$) exhibit no significant influence on trust. Consequently, hypotheses H_1 , H_2 , and H_3 were rejected, suggesting

Table 4: Structural Equation Model				
Hypotheses	Path	Beta	p-Value	Inference
H_1	RR \rightarrow TR	0.102	0.404	Rejected
H_2	FC \rightarrow TR	0.131	0.503	Rejected
H_3	RER \rightarrow TR	0.072	0.284	Rejected
H_4	IS \rightarrow TR	0.234	0.032**	Supported
H_5	ES \rightarrow TR	0.393	0.001***	Supported
H_6	TR \rightarrow PI	0.704	0.000***	Supported
Note: *** denotes $p < 0.001$, ** indicates $p < 0.05$.				

that SCCs do not significantly impact consumer trust in the Indian context. However, information support emerges as a significant predictor of trust ($\beta = 0.234, p < 0.05$), along with emotional support, which positively affects trust ($\beta = 0.393, p < 0.05$). Thus, hypotheses H_4 and H_5 are supported. Moreover, trust is identified as a significant determinant of purchase intention ($\beta = 0.704, p < 0.05$), affirming hypothesis H_6 .

The determination coefficient (R^2) is employed to assess the structural model's goodness and interpret its effectiveness (Rahaman et al., 2022). With R^2 value of 0.694, it is elucidated that 69.4% of the variance in trust is accounted for by the five independent variables. Additionally, R^2 value of 0.496 indicates that 49.6% of the variance in purchase intention can be explained by trust (Figure 2).



Mediation Effect

Bootstrapping method was utilized to assess the mediation effect. Table 5 indicates that trust does not serve as a mediator in the relationship between SCCs and purchase intention. This result contradicts the findings of Elshaer et al. (2024), who found that trust plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between SCCs (ratings and reviews, forums and communities, and recommendations and referrals) and purchase intention. Limited research has explored trust as a mediator in the relationship between SS and purchase intention (Makmor et al., 2023). However, Table 5 demonstrates that trust significantly mediates the relationship between information support and emotional support, and purchase intention.

Table 5: Mediation Effect			
Mediation Effect	Beta	<i>p</i> -Value	Inference
RR → TR → PI	0.072	0.417	Rejected
FC → TR → PI	0.092	0.280	Rejected
RER → TR → PI	0.051	0.515	Rejected
IS → TR → PI	0.165	0.035	Supported
ES → TR → PI	0.277	0.001	Supported

Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted consumer purchasing behavior, leading to a notable surge in social commerce adoption driven by increased social media usage, thereby reshaping the dynamics of e-commerce. The study investigated the influence of SCCs and SS on purchase intention in the post-pandemic period, as well as the mediating role of trust in these relationships. Drawing upon a comprehensive literature review, a conceptual model was developed integrating ratings and reviews, forums and communities, recommendations and referrals, informational support, emotional support, trust, and purchase intention, from which six hypotheses were formulated. These hypotheses were subsequently tested using structural equation modeling with Smart PLS 4.0 software.

While previous studies have indicated a significant influence of SCCs on trust (Elshaer et al., 2024), the findings of the present study reveal that ratings and reviews, forums and communities, and recommendations and referrals do not exert a significant influence on trust among Indian consumers on social commerce platforms, contrary to expectations.

This lack of significant influence may be attributed to several factors. Firstly, consumers perceive ratings and reviews as potentially fabricated or influenced by sellers to manipulate sales, with instances of consumers being incentivized for positive reviews observed. Reports from news outlets in India have highlighted instances where consumers' low ratings were not published, further eroding trust in these platforms. Secondly, the absence of face-to-face interactions in online forums and communities may contribute to consumer distrust of these social platforms in India. Lastly, consumers may perceive recommendations and referrals received as not relevant to their needs, thus diminishing trust in these sources. Consequently, hypotheses H_1 , H_2 , and H_3 were rejected.

However, the findings indicate that both informational support and emotional support significantly influence trust, suggesting that SS mechanisms play a crucial role in enhancing consumer trust on social commerce platforms, consistent with previous research (Liu et al., 2019; Makmor et al., 2023). Therefore, hypotheses H_4 and H_5 are supported. Furthermore, empirical results from H_6 found that trust emerges as a key determinant of purchase intention on social commerce platforms, aligning with previous studies affirming the direct and significant positive effect of consumer trust on purchase intention (Hsiao et al., 2010; Kumar & Sharma, 2019; Wang et al., 2022). Additionally, the results suggest that trust mediates the relationship between SS and purchase intention, consistent with previous findings (Makmor et al., 2023). However, the mediating role of trust in the relationship between SCCs and purchase intention is found to be insignificant.

Conclusion

The study underscores the importance of SS mechanisms in fostering consumer trust and purchase intention in the post-pandemic era of social commerce. Despite the non-significant influence of SCCs on trust, the significant influence of SS on trust underscores the need for businesses to prioritize transparent communication and supportive interactions with consumers to enhance trust and drive purchase intentions on social commerce platforms. This study offers valuable insights into the post-pandemic dynamics of social commerce in India. By effectively using these constructs, businesses can enhance consumer buying behavior in social commerce.

Implications: This study offers theoretical implications for the existing literature, benefiting researchers in the field. It employs various constructs, including SCCs, SS, trust, and purchase intention, to formulate a comprehensive model. This model is subsequently tested and validated using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) technique. Unlike previous studies, which did not incorporate these variables into a single model within the context of social commerce during the post-pandemic period, our study stands out as unique. It serves as a foundation for future research endeavors.

It also provides several practical implications for marketers and businesses. Trust is a constant challenge for businesses, so they should prioritize building trust among consumers on social commerce platforms. The findings indicate that SCCs have an insignificant influence on trust. Marketers can address this by implementing the following measures: Firstly, they need to ensure the transparency and authenticity of reviews, as consumers often question the validity of reviews, suspecting them to be fake or manipulated. Secondly, businesses should actively engage with customers in forums and communities, promptly addressing their concerns and building relationships through effective customer service. Encouraging meaningful discussions within these groups is also essential. Thirdly, marketers should develop strategies and utilize data analysis to offer personalized and relevant recommendations and referrals based on consumer preferences. In cases where SCCs have little impact on trust, marketers should explore alternative channels, such as influencer marketing or direct communication, to establish trust. This study also found that SS significantly predicts trust, suggesting that providing comprehensive product information and responsive customer support can enhance customer trust. ❖

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Appendix

All Items Measured Using 5-point Likert Scale	
Ratings and Reviews, Forums and Communities, and Recommendations and Referrals were adapted from Hajli (2015)	
RR1	I feel ratings and reviews are generally frank.
RR2	I feel ratings and reviews are reliable.
RR3	Overall ratings and reviews are trustworthy.
RR4	I trust ratings and reviews and share my status and pictures with them.
FC1	I feel forums and communities are generally frank.
FC2	I feel forums and communities are reliable.
FC3	Overall forums and communities are trustworthy.
FC4	I trust forums and communities and share my status and pictures with them.
RER1	I feel recommendations and referrals are generally frank.
RER2	I feel recommendations and referrals are reliable.
RER3	Overall recommendations and referrals are trustworthy.
RER4	I trust recommendations and referrals and share my status and pictures with them.
Informational support and Emotional support were adapted from Alshawawreh (2020)	
IS1	On the social network sites, some people would offer suggestions when I needed help.
IS2	When I encountered a problem, some people on social network sites would give me information to help me overcome the problem.
IS3	When faced with difficulties, some people on social network sites would help me discover the cause and provide me with suggestions.
ES1	When I face difficulties, I can easily find support from friends on social network.
ES2	When I face difficulties, some people on social network sites comfort and encourage me to face the difficulties.

Appendix (Cont.)

ES3	When I face difficulties, some people on social network sites listen to me talking about my private feelings.
ES4	When I face difficulties, some people on social network sites express interest and concern in my emotions.
Trust was adapted from Hajli et al. (2017)	
TR1	Promises made by social commerce websites that I used for my last online shopping are likely to be reliable.
TR2	I do not doubt the honesty of the social commerce website that I used for my last online shopping.
TR3	Based on my experience with the online vendor in the past, I know it is honest and truthful to me.
TR4	Based on my experience with the online vendor in the past, I know they care about customers.
Purchase intention is adapted from Wang and Yu (2017) and Hajli et al. (2017)	
PI1	I plan to do more of my shopping on social commerce websites in the future.
PI2	I prefer to shop on social commerce websites.
PI3	I Intend to provide my personal information for purchasing on social commerce websites.

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