



Original Article

The Potential of Social Commerce for Small Fashion Businesses in Pakistan: A Case Study Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the potential of using social commerce as an alternative to e-commerce, focusing on fashion businesses in Pakistan. Despite gaining popularity amongst small businesses, the use and implications of the new form of online business model, “Social Commerce” for small fashion businesses, are largely unknown in Pakistan. Qualitative data were collected from six fashion case businesses using in-depth interviews as a data collection method. The data obtained was analysed using qualitative content analysis. The findings revealed that small fashion businesses in Pakistan can significantly benefit from using Social Commerce, as it can help overcome the limitations of e-commerce while enhancing the advantages of building relationships with customers through integrating social aspects in commerce-related activities. This study provides a unique perspective on the adoption of social commerce among small fashion businesses in Pakistan, showcasing it as an alternative to traditional e-commerce. Utilising the social support theory, the findings emphasise the importance of social support in cultivating customer relationships.

Keywords: *e-commerce market, Online business model, Small fashion businesses, Social commerce*

INTRODUCTION

While it was traditional electronic commerce (e-commerce) that laid the foundation for online retail, social commerce, which combines social media and e-commerce elements (Han et al., 2018) has transformed the way businesses operate and engage with customers (Hajli et al., 2017). It has emerged as a new avenue for selling products online and now being used as an alternative to traditional e-commerce, especially in developing countries where the potential of e-commerce remains largely untapped due to significant barriers facing the economies (Hajli & Sims, 2015; Lu et al., 2016). One such developing country is Pakistan, where the adoption of e-commerce is significantly low due to several impeding factors, including a lack of digital infrastructure, weak payment systems, and the issue of consumer trust (Akhtlaq & Ahmed, 2015; Rahman et al., 2018).

The low e-commerce readiness posed a significant challenge for fashion businesses, given the inherently visual nature of the industry. Compared to their western counterparts where online shopping through e-commerce websites is the norm, (Guercini et al., 2018) fashion businesses in Pakistan have struggled to leverage this medium. Instead, they have shifted to social media as their primary avenue for selling products online by creating business pages on Facebook and Instagram. This strategic shift can be attributed to the growing number of social media users in Pakistan; 37 million, constituting nearly half of the country’s total internet users at the time of the study. These users were not merely socialising on these platforms but also using them to purchase products online, a trend

that was gaining traction in this developing economy. Fashion businesses quickly recognised the potential of this medium for their business growth and adapted to this trend.

Despite the industry embracing this trend, academic research on the topic area of social commerce from the context of Pakistan was scarce. Limited extant literature from this region uncovered the factors affecting consumer adoption of social commerce using quantitative methods (Hassan et al., 2018; Solangi, et al., 2019). Recognising the gap in academic literature from a business perspective, there was a need to understand the benefits social commerce offers for fashion businesses and to comprehend the challenges they have faced in successfully utilising this medium. Therefore, a qualitative methodology was chosen for the study, providing a basis for employing a case study approach and interviews as the data collection method.

The theory of social support was employed as a theoretical lens to analyse the results obtained from the interview data. While numerous studies in the social commerce domain have sought to theorise the role of social support from a consumer perspective in different contexts (Liang & Turban, 2011; Hajli & Sims, 2015; Yahia et al., 2018; Sheikh et al., 2019); there was limited evidence from a business standpoint, which is a primary focus of the current paper. The study investigated the following research questions:

- What are the reasons for small fashion businesses to adopt social commerce?
- Are there any problematic issues facing small fashion businesses using social commerce?
- What factors contribute to the low uptake of

e-commerce amongst small fashion businesses in Pakistan?

LITERATURE REVIEW

E-Commerce

The commercialisation of the internet in the early 1990s coined the term e-commerce which involves buying and selling of goods and services on the internet in exchange of money and data for executing these transactions (Laudon, 2008). For the current research, the broader definition of e-commerce proposed by Rayport and Jaworski (2003) is adopted. According to the definition, ecommerce facilitates “technology-mediated exchanges between parties (individuals and organisations) as well as the electronically based intra or interorganisational activities that facilitate such exchanges” (p. 4). This suggests that e-commerce not only encompasses information exchange between two parties for the transaction of good and services, but also the supporting activities to facilitate this exchange including how a business operates internally in terms of managing system processes and how these organisations associate with external parties including suppliers, competitors, and customers.

Social Commerce

There is a lack of an agreed-upon definition of social commerce in the current body of literature. The earliest known definition of social commerce described it as the evolution of e-commerce, that combines social networking and e-commerce. Later, Liang and Turban (2011) in their seminal paper defined social commerce as a concept that uses “Web 2.0 and social media technologies to support online interactions and user contributions, to assist in the acquisition of products and services” (p. 5). Adding to this definition, Zhou et al. (2013) argued that social commerce uses internet-based media to allow the activities of marketing and promotion, buying and selling, and curating and sharing of products and services in online marketplaces and communities.

Despite the variations in definitions, the social interactions generated in the form of user-generated content (UGC) online to facilitate commercial activities, remain a reoccurring theme. Hence, for this research, the definition “a new business model of e-commerce, which makes use of web 2.0 technologies and social media to support social-related exchange activities” is used (as proposed by Han et al. 2018, p. 41). Research on social commerce stems from two perspectives, first through the integration of social commerce with traditional e-commerce websites and second,

by adding e-commerce features directly onto social media (Liang & Turban, 2011); the latter perspective is followed in the current research. This is because the phenomenon observed in Pakistan falls under the remit of the perspective where businesses were directly using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to conduct commerce activities.

Difference between e-Commerce and Social Commerce

E-commerce and social commerce are both related to online buying and selling, but they differ in terms of their business model, goals, systems interactions, and customer connection (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Esmaeili & Hashemi, 2019). Considering the first differential aspect i.e. business model, e-commerce is a product-oriented model and social commerce is a socially oriented and customer-centric business model (Li & Ku, 2018). In terms of business goals, e-commerce platforms focus on providing an efficient online shopping experience on websites using system features such as product categorisation and descriptions, quick search, optimised checkout processes and personalised recommendations (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Baethge et al., 2016). Whereas social commerce focuses on creating an interactive shopping experience through an emphasis on UGC generated through recommendations and referrals, forums and communities, and ratings and reviews (Hajli et al., 2017; Hajli & Sims, 2015). This asserts that e-commerce is supportive of the informational and transactional aspects whilst social commerce focuses on the social interaction aspect (Shen, 2012).

The other two aspects system interactions and customer connection are intrinsically connected. In system interactions, e-commerce enabled by Web 1.0 supports one-way browsing and the content is solely created by businesses. In contrast, social commerce based on Web 2.0 technologies facilitates two-way communication (Busalim, 2016). Concerning customer connection, on e-commerce platforms customers have an isolated shopping experience as they interact with the system independently and make purchase decisions without the involvement of others. Whereas social commerce facilitates social shopping through the inclusion of social elements which allows customers to interact with other customers, seek advice and opinions and view recommendations, reviews and ratings on products and services (Chen & Shen, 2015).

From a marketing aspect, social commerce relies on social media platforms for both sales and marketing activities. However, due to the limited capabilities

of e-commerce platforms as a marketing medium, these platforms rely on other avenues for marketing which include search engine optimisation (SEO), email marketing and social media (Lin et al., 2017). In addition, the former allows customers to be active participants in marketing-related activities as opposed to the transmission of one-way marketing messages in an e-commerce environment.

Business Benefits of Social Commerce

The extant literature predominantly focused on the benefits of using social media for businesses with limited attention given to social commerce's business benefits. In their research, Odoom et al. (2017) confirmed that social media is a low-cost marketing channel for small businesses in comparison to the traditional methods of advertisement. It enables businesses to enhance their visibility and increase their brand awareness (Ahmad et al., 2018). Razak and Latip (2016) drew a comparison between e-commerce websites and social media and argued that social media is an easy-to-use medium and helps mitigate the risk of technological expertise that is required for setting up and maintaining a website. Schaupp and Bélanger (2019) and Sangi et al. (2018) confirmed that the integration of social aspect in commerce transactions on social media improves customer services thus positively impacting customer-business relationships. These findings align well with the earlier work conducted by Linda (2010) and Hajli et al. (2013) in the social commerce domain, as the core dimension of this innovative model is to use social interactions for commercial transactions; driving benefits for both businesses and customers.

Social Commerce in Pakistan

The earliest studies on social commerce within the context of Pakistan investigated the potential of using this medium from an entrepreneurial and consumer perspective respectively (Talat et al., 2013). It was found that because of the growing popularity and cost-effectiveness of social media, many women in Pakistan were setting up their small businesses on these platforms instead of using e-commerce websites. The findings were later re-iterated by Zafar et al. (2019) who confirmed that social media has created entrepreneurial opportunities for women in Pakistan, who before social media were not able to do jobs or conduct business due to either financial or social constraints. In terms of the benefits for these women entrepreneurs, flexible information sharing and the ability to communicate directly with the consumers were quoted to be of high value. Whereas the issues related to imitations of products and unfair pricing

were evaluated to be a cause of concern for women entrepreneurs.

From the consumer perspective, a sense of familiarity with the social media platforms and trust were key factors that encouraged customers to shop online from the businesses directly set up on Facebook. The interactive nature of social media sites made the online shopping experience more meaningful for consumers as it facilitated information exchange amongst customers through social interactions consequently impacting their purchase intentions (Hassan et al., 2018). Ease of use and usefulness of these sites was considered other important factors of social commerce adoption (Solangi et al., 2019). A similar finding from the study by Ullah et al. (2019) confirmed that the integration of social elements in social commerce transactions leads to the formation of trust in sellers and positively influence consumers' purchase intention.

Though the current body of literature shows evidence of understanding the benefits and challenges of using social commerce in Pakistan from an entrepreneurial and consumer perspective. To the best of knowledge, to date, no research has been conducted in the context of Pakistan that examined the use of the social commerce business model with a focus on small fashion businesses. This is a knowledge gap that the current research aims to fill.

Social Support

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies and social media has facilitated the provision of social support on the Internet. Liang and Turban (2011) in their seminal work argued that social support is a major value that internet users can derive from online communities on social media. In this context, online social support is defined as, "As online actions that individuals carry out by collaborating with peers through social media. This can either be providing assistance or seeking support" (p. 62). Social support online can be categorised into two types: Informational support and emotional support (Liang & Turban, 2011; Hajli & Sims, 2015). The informational support refers to "providing messages, in the form of recommendations, advice or knowledge, that could be helpful for solving problems" and emotional support describes the "messages that involve emotional concerns, such as caring, understanding and encouragement" (Liang & Turban, 2011, p. 72).

In the current study, social support serves as a theoretical lens for analysing and interpreting empirical interview data. Using this theoretical perspective, the study aims to decipher how businesses operating through social commerce can benefit from

understanding its role in building consumer trust and fostering relationships with customers, particularly within the context of Pakistani society where relationships between individuals plays a crucial role in accomplishing tasks within social, personal, and professional spheres (Jamal, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodology was selected to examine the use of social commerce among fashion businesses in Pakistan. This type of methodology is commonly associated with the Interpretive Paradigm and aims to generate in-depth insights into real world problems through engagement with places and social actors, including people, communities, organisations, or institutions. It emphasises on words, images and narrative information in data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2016). As the study intended to explore why fashion businesses opt for social commerce as an alternative to e-commerce, qualitative methodology was deemed more appropriate. Within the qualitative approach, the selected research design for this research was a Case Study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A case study is an “empirical method that aims to explore and understand a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2018, p. 15). It involves undertaking an in-depth investigation of a specific case or multiple cases using a range of data collection methods, to gain an understanding of the intricacies, and complexities of the phenomenon under study. In a case study approach, a case is defined as an “object of interest in its own right and the researcher aims to provide an in-depth examination of it” (Bryman, 2016, p. 61). In this research, a case is defined as a small business characterised by an employment size between 5-24 and productive assets of approximately 5-10 million (PKR), with total assets of less than 50 million (PKR) in Pakistan (Dar et al., 2017).

Case Selection Process

Yin (2018) suggested that multiple case studies should be preferred over single case studies as it enables the research to identify patterns and understand similarities and differences within and across cases. This often results in more robust evidence and provides a wider perspective across multiple cases. Therefore, the current study has employed multiple cases to yield a comprehensive understanding of the social commerce phenomenon. For the selection of case studies, a non-probability purposive sampling strategy was used.

The criteria used to select the cases were as follows:

- The chosen cases must be small businesses based on the definition proposed by Dar et al. (2017).
- They must be fashion businesses that were selling fashion-related products including apparel, handbags, footwear, and accessories.
- The chosen cases must be using social media as their main trading platform to understand why these businesses were using social media for selling products online.
- These businesses must be operating through at least one of the selected social media platforms, namely Facebook and Instagram. These platforms were chosen due to their widespread popularity in Pakistan at the time of the study. Facebook had a user base of 33 million, and Instagram had 64 million active users.
- Additionally, the businesses must be actively using one or both platforms.

An effort was made to select different types of small fashion businesses to ensure better sample coverage. Six case studies were chosen for the research study based on the proposed number of case studies by (Yin, 2018) i.e. between 3 to 6. Table 1 provides an overview of the selected cases.

Table 1
Case Studies

Case Studies	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6
Starting year	2017	2013	2014	2012	2013	2015
About Business	Fashion Designer	Fabric & Fashion Designer	Fashion Designer	Fashion Designer/ Makeup Educator	Third-Party Seller	Third-Party Seller
Products	Modest clothing & accessories	Chikankari clothing & fabrics	Eastern & Fusion wear clothing	Eastern clothing wear	Luxury designer inspired (fashion accessories)	Traditional clothing & fabrics (embroidered)
Target Customer	18-50	22-45	18-38	18-38	25-45	25-50
Mode of payment	Cash on delivery (COD) Bank Transfer Western Union	COD Bank Transfer Western Union Money Gram	Bank Transfer Western Union Money Gram	Bank Transfer Western Union Money Gram	COD Bank Transfer Western Union Paypal	COD Bank Transfer Western Union Money Gram
No. of Employees	6-8	10-12	13-15	15-18	12-14	10-12
Platforms (including the year businesses started using these)	Facebook: 2017 Instagram: 2017	Facebook: 2013 Instagram: 2016	Facebook: 2014 Instagram: 2017	Facebook: 2012 Instagram: 2014	Facebook: 2013 Instagram: 2017	Facebook: 2015 Instagram: 2016

Note: For anonymity purposes, the selected businesses have been coded as B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, and B6.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection method. An interview is one of the most employed data collection methods in qualitative case studies (Bryman, 2016) and enables capturing people's experiences and expectations (Patton, 2014). It is often a useful method to use when investigating an underexplored research area as in the case of the current study. From the different types of interviews, semi-structured interviews were chosen because it combines the structured approach with the flexibility (Bryman, 2016). This means that the researcher can not only ask questions about the subject matter, but the participants also get the opportunity to elaborate further and express their views on the topics being discussed (Saunders et al., 2018).

For the selection of interview participants, the owners of the selected case studies were chosen. This is because at the time of the interviews, five out of six business owners were managing the business pages on social media platforms themselves. The rationale for choosing interviews was to gather data on business owners' experiences and perspective on using social media for commerce, and more importantly to understand why they preferred social media over e-commerce websites. The key themes covered in the interviews were benefits of social commerce, the limitations of e-commerce, and specific problems businesses were facing. This aligned with the research questions guiding the study.

Data Analysis

Table 2
Summary of Data Analysis Process

Phases	Description
Immersion	Becoming familiarised with the data
Organisation	Open coding Generating initial codes by re-reading the data
	Categorisation Categories were formed into areas of similar meaning
	Abstraction The conceptually similar or dissimilar categories were converted into themes
Reporting	The results are reported in the form of themes

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was chosen for analysing the data obtained from interviews. It is a useful method of analysing the data obtained through interviews and seeks to search for themes and patterns within the material being analysed (Bryman, 2016). This analytical technique preserves the benefits of traditional content analysis by using the quantitative step of analysis for the quantification of codes, which then leads to interpreting the patterns found in the data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In terms of the analytical procedure, QCA was carried out in three phases that are: preparation, organisation, and reporting phase.

The first phase began with transcribing the interviews. After the interview transcripts were prepared, the researcher then proceeded to read the transcripts several times and immersed in the data to draw strong inferences from the content analysis (Flick, 2013). After this, the organisation phase began which included open coding, categories formation and abstraction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Open coding was done manually, and all the emergent codes were written in as much detail as possible. The initial codes that emerged from the transcripts were broad and subjective; hence, these were modified by combining similar data into categories. After creating categories, the abstraction process began during which the relevant categories were linked and grouped to create themes. To make the analysis more manageable, the final coding was done on Nvivo (Elliot, 2018). The last phase involved reporting data that emerged from the interview analysis in the form of themes along with quotations to emphasise the findings. Table 2 summarises the data analysis process used for the interviews.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Aligned with the research questions, three key

Table 3
Themes Emerged from Case Studies Analysis

No.	Themes
1.	Benefits of using social commerce
2.	Problematic issues in using social commerce
3.	Limitations of e-commerce websites for small fashion businesses

themes emerged from the data collected through interviews. Table 3 shows the summary of the themes.

Benefits of Using Social Media Social Commerce

Several benefits of using social commerce as an alternative to e-commerce were reported by fashion business owners. These are summarised in table 4.

Table 4
Summary of Key Findings of First Theme

No.	Benefits of using social commerce
1.	Easy to use and cost-effective medium
2.	Enables connecting with prospective businesses through global research
3.	Enables creating and nurturing relationships with customers through interactivity
4.	Increasing brand awareness and building a brand image
5.	Customer service channel

One of the most cited reasons for using social commerce was the ease of setting up and running a business page on these platforms. Cost-effectiveness was another benefit mentioned by the business owner. This is highlighted through the comment by B1,

Social media has provided a conduit for small businesses to market and sell products online in a cost-effective way as opposed to the traditional method of selling.

Given the high illiteracy and unemployment rate in Pakistan (SMEDA, 2019), social commerce is deemed to be a natural fit for small businesses looking to adopt an online business portal that is both easy to use and cost-efficient, thus improving their access to economic opportunities. Fashion entrepreneurs have capitalised on this opportunity and leveraged it to build their businesses. These findings coincide with the findings of a study by (Zafar et al., 2019). Global reach and connecting with other prospective businesses on social media were other advantages cited by the fashion businesses. To illustrate this point, B2 mentioned,

It was because of running our business pages on social media that we were invited to participate in fashion weeks in New York and London. If it was not for social media, how else we would have been able to connect with prospects business globally?

This example demonstrates the scale and growth potential of social commerce for improving brand awareness which was another benefit highlighted by the case businesses. This can be observed from a statement by B2 business owner,

A major benefit of using social media is that it not only helps in marketing and commerce but also in increasing brand awareness. It is a major part of brand building and for our brand, it worked like a charm. Small businesses have limited budget and resources and with social media, we now have a

medium to conduct marketing, sales, and brand-building activities all in one platform.

In a fashion industry dominated by established brands and designers, the prospects for small fashion businesses in Pakistan to increase their market presence both locally and on a global scale is a welcoming opportunity presented by social commerce. Another benefit witnessed by these businesses when selling through social media was an opportunity to create and nurture relationships with customers due to the interactive nature of this medium. Emphasising this, B5 commented,

I think when people are buying from social media businesses, they are looking to create a personal connection with the sellers through direct communication. This instantly creates a relationship of trust between a buyer and seller because it allows them to talk directly to the sellers regarding the products and services. It is because of using social media that I have been able to build a trust relationship with my customers and they have become a part of my business family now.

Business owners also emphasised the importance of social media for customer services. In the words of B6,

I think a unique benefit that social media has provided is to step up our customer service using the reviews sections. Sometimes, customers message you directly if they have any questions or concerns. Sometimes, they comment on the posts. Be it any way, you get to know what your customers are experiencing. Providing good customer service has never been this easy.

The findings established that it is due to consumer sellers' interactions in the social commerce domain, trust is established between customers and sellers as communication is two-way and transparent. These findings agree with the findings of a study by Tajvidi et

al. (2021) confirming that the social support generated through interactions between consumers and sellers can help enhance consumer's trust in sellers. However, this is the first study to confirm this in Pakistan's context. The provision of online social support by sellers through answering customer queries, and the customer's involvement in the creation of product-related information by sharing their reviews and opinions, resulted in the creation of informational support which played a crucial role in influencing consumer decisions. It is argued that small businesses using social media for selling their products should provide all the necessary information related to the products and ordering process. For common inquiries and issues, an automated pre-written response can be used as this assures customers that the business is available to help. The evidence from the reviewed literature also supports this (Abed et al., 2016; Blazquez, et al., 2019). When businesses provide better quality of informational support, it creates an environment of trust, leading to an increased sense of security for consumers and their willingness to buy from social media sellers.

Table 5

Summary of Key Findings of the Second Theme

No.	Problematic issues in using social commerce
1.	Negative reviews and comments
2.	Customers do not give reviews and share pictures
3.	Confusion about using Instagram for marketing and selling
4.	Always on content strategy
5.	Online shopping scams and fraud

One of the major problems mentioned by all the business owners was the negative reviews and comments on their business pages. This is because negative word-of-mouth has an impact on the perception and reputation of a business thus reducing trust and ultimately affecting consumers' decisions to purchase from these sellers. Sharing this concern B1 commented,

I think it is very easy access to people to come and write anything on my page whether it is true or not. I will give you an example: A few people had ordered from another brand with a similar name "ABC". Whilst looking for their page on Facebook they came across my page and without verification posted negative comments regarding their experience.

Mirroring this, B4 mentioned,

One downside of using social media is that you cannot control what people are saying about your brand. I

In addition, when customers expressed their satisfaction and appreciation for products and services or their interactions with the businesses through reviews, it served as emotional support. This positive reinforcement helped in enhancing the sense of well-being of both, the recipient of the feedback (i.e. sellers) and the customers who benefited from it. In addition, engaging in conversations with other customers to take advice and opinion, recommend products to each other's or express concerns created a sense of belonging and emotional support through satisfying the need of being cared for. The results align with the finding of a study by Ullah et al. (2019) from Pakistan confirming that social support plays a critical role in positively influencing consumers' intention to use social commerce.

Problematic Issues in Using Social Commerce

Interview participants reported some problems and issues which they experienced using social media channels as their main trading platform. These are summarised in table 5.

think it is all part of the package, you have to see how well you take it; social media now has a lot of power. We work so hard to build our brand name but if we make one mistake people can just tear us down into pieces, it is unfair!

For responding to the negative feedback, these businesses adopted response and censorship strategies. The former involved listening to complaints by customers and addressing their concerns whereas if this strategy failed to work; the sellers opted for censorship, which is deleting the negative comments from their pages. These empirical findings conform with the literature which suggests that both response and censorship strategies are effective for small businesses when dealing with negative feedback and can potentially protect their brand image and profitability (Thomas et al., 2012). Despite both strategies seeming to work well for the case businesses, the latter did raise

concerns about brand transparency for customers, the absence of which can influence trust in consumer-seller relationships.

Another issue highlighted by business owners was that customers do not give reviews or share pictures. Echoing this through the statement by B4 business owner,

I tell all my clients to send me photographs when you wear outfits designed by me because that is how my sales work, and this is how people will trust me as a genuine seller. But people barely send pictures, just as an example: If I have sold 50 outfits, I only get about 5 pictures which is sad because a lot of hard work goes into it.

It is argued that once a relationship of trust is built between sellers and customers, this issue could be managed. Offering incentives, such as loyalty or rewards schemes, or discounts on next purchases can be effective strategies (Rehnen et al., 2017). Two business owners (B5 & B6) also experienced issues when using Instagram for marketing and selling their products and received an underwhelming response despite using similar content across their Facebook and Instagram pages. Reaffirming this, B6 commented,

I feel that it is still difficult for me to understand how I can effectively use Instagram for promoting and selling my products and so far, it has not been profitable for my business.

This closely links to the issue of keeping up with constantly evolving social media trends and always-on content strategy which could be a bane for small businesses using it as a main trading platform. Echoing this, B3 highlighted,

Social media technologies are changing at such a fast pace and there are a lot of things happening in terms of social media marketing and content management. I sometimes feel that it gets hard for me to catch up

Table 6
Summary of Key Findings of the Third Theme

No.	Limitations of e-Commerce Websites for Small Fashion Businesses
1.	One-way transactional communication
2.	Technical know-how
3.	The need for outsourcing e-commerce website management
4.	Expensive development and management of websites
5.	Need for designing a visually appealing website

One-way transactional aspect of e-commerce was identified to be one of the key limitations of e-commerce websites for fashion businesses. To reinforce this, B4

or keep up with the latest trends. It is not easy for me to do everything all at once. Neither do I have a team to look after my social media account nor I am outsourcing the services.

B5 also added,

Your business has to be out there on these platforms, and you have to keep updating your content regularly otherwise you will not appear on your customer's timeline, and they will start forgetting your brand.

Through collaborating with other businesses, influencers and customers, and curating content, these businesses could benefit greatly. Business owners also highlighted the issue of online shopping scams and fraud faced by customers. Sharing one such incident B2 expressed her concern,

With the increase in the number of Facebook sellers, there has also been a rise in online scams and fraud. It is very difficult to tell who a genuine seller is. One of my overseas relatives ordered a dress online from a business based in Pakistan through the Facebook page. She made the payment after order confirmation. Later, the account vanished from Facebook and the contact number she was given wasn't reachable.

These findings confirmed that vulnerability to online scams and frauds is evident on social media as well. One possible explanation of these is a general lack of trust in the online shopping environment in Pakistan, regardless of the platform used for these transactions.

Limitations of e-Commerce Websites for Small Fashion Businesses

The reason why the chosen fashion businesses opted for the social commerce business model instead of using traditional e-commerce was found to be associated with the limitations of e-commerce websites. The main limitations that emerged from the data are presented in table 6.

commented,

On an e-commerce website, the customers have an isolated shopping experience because they look for the

products, add them to the shopping cart and complete the transaction. In this process, social interaction is a missing element that I find extremely important for any small fashion business. That's the reason why I started my business on social media.

Hence, the absence of social interactions in traditional e-commerce platforms is one of the factors that has limited the use of this medium by small businesses. As social commerce offers a more sociable and interactive shopping experience, Pakistani consumers also prefer to shop online through this medium. Unlike e-commerce, social commerce facilitated consumer-seller and consumer-to-customer interactions. The findings revealed that the actions carried out by sellers and consumers using social interactivity tools in social commerce become a source of online social support, which not only facilitates a sense of community but also plays a major role in cultivating trust amongst sellers and consumers. Both these elements were found to be missing in the e-commerce environment.

Another reason that negatively impacted the adoption of e-commerce websites amongst small businesses was the need to develop technical expertise for creating and managing e-commerce websites. The need for outsourcing e-commerce services and the limited availability of resources in terms of financial means to invest in professional website development, ongoing maintenance, and updates were other limitations that businesses encountered. As can be seen by the response of one of the business owners,

Setting up an e-commerce website requires investment. If the person does not know how to run a website, they are likely to outsource the services which come at an expensive rate?

In comparison, setting up and managing business pages on social media was found to be easy and affordable and quoted to be two of the key reasons businesses used it as their main trading platform. The findings advocate for leveraging social media to mitigate the limitations associated with technical skills and the costly management of e-commerce websites. In addition to this, designing visually appealing websites was another concern raised by the case businesses. B4 mentioned,

If the product you're selling online is fashion, it is incredibly important to have an attractive website. It must be visually appealing, otherwise who will buy from you?

However, it is also an aspect that requires attention when developing content for business pages on social media. For this, businesses can greatly drive value from

social interactions and consumer engagement on social media.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has provided insights into the reasons why social commerce has emerged as an alternative to traditional e-commerce in the developing country of Pakistan. By using small fashion businesses as case studies, the paper concludes that the integration of social aspects in commerce transactions is a primary factor that has led to the adoption of this medium over the e-commerce business model. The findings shed light on the numerous benefits of social commerce, including opportunities for enhanced customer engagement that builds trust and strengthens relationships, amplified brand visibility, improved customer services, cost efficiency, and ease of use. Furthermore, the findings brought to the forefront problematic issues linked to the utilisation of social media for e-commerce by small businesses including the potential impact of negative reviews and comments, lack of consumer engagement, and content creation. In light of these findings, it is evident that small fashion businesses can greatly benefit from using the social commerce business model as it can help in overcoming the limitations of e-commerce while also providing the benefit of building relationships with customers through the incorporation of social aspects in commerce activities.

In terms of the theoretical contribution, the study utilised the Social Support Theory to understand the dynamics of leveraging both informational and emotional support for fostering relationships with customers. The research findings advance our comprehension of this theory from a business perspective in the cultural context of Pakistan, where the integration of social aspects into commerce transactions has proven to be highly valuable. The practical implications for businesses operating in this environment are to ensure they provide informational content that educates customers about product features, usage, and benefits and to foster a positive and supportive environment within their communities to enhance emotional support and trust.

Limitations

While this research has offered valuable insights into the practical benefits and challenges of small fashion businesses in Pakistan when using social commerce, it is essential to acknowledge the identified limitations. Firstly, conducted within the specific context of Pakistan, the findings may have limited

applicability to other developing countries. Future research in culturally similar economies like Thailand and Bangladesh could enhance confidence in the study's findings. Secondly, although focused on small fashion businesses, the findings offer a more general overview of the use of social commerce applicable to any business type. Future research could delve into this more deeply by integrating fashion marketing theories, such as relationship marketing, for a more nuanced understanding. Additionally, whilst qualitative studies are useful in generating in-depth insights, they are limited in generalisability. Future studies could use quantitative methods to provide statistically significant and more generalisable results.

Competing Interest

The authors had no competing interests.

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