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EXAMINING MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS BEHIND THE ADOPTION OF ONLINE SOCIAL PROOF IN CONSUMERS' DECISION-MAKING

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Abstract:

The fast rise of e-commerce has increased the importance of online social proof as a key aspect in customer decision-making. The present study examines the factors that influence the adoption of online social proof, with an emphasis on trust and credibility, perceived risk, convenience, perceived quality, and social influence. For the study, data were collected from 323 online shoppers and analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to test the relationship between the constructs. The findings indicate that trust and credibility, convenience, perceived risk and perceived quality considerably enhance the adoption of online social proof; however, social influence has a negative but significant relation in the adoption of Social Proof. The study offers empirical insights into how behavioural and psychological factors affect consumers' reliance on online social proof, with useful ramifications for e-commerce marketers looking to enhance consumer trust, reduce risk perception, and establish credibility in the online environment.

Keywords:

Online social proof, trust, perceived risk, convenience, perceived quality, e-commerce.

1. Introduction

The rapid growth of the Internet, social media, and e-commerce has changed how consumers shop. One of the factors that has changed the consumer behavior pattern is the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). A large number of consumers have shifted their pattern of shopping towards online shopping (Bhatti et al., 2020). The Internet offers users the convenience of shopping for a diverse choice of things from anywhere in the world (Redda, 2019). As a result of the proliferation of the internet and various social media platforms, the concept of social proof has grown more pervasive and significant than it ever was before. The term Social Proof was made popular by psychologist Robert Cialdini in his book "Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion," in which he described social proof as the phenomenon in which individuals presume that the behaviors of others are representative of acceptable behavior for

a certain situation. In today's digital marketplace, social proof, such as product reviews, ratings, testimonials, and user-generated content, has evolved as an effective technique for influencing consumer behaviour. In today's time, it is not sufficient for any significant firm to just keep to the traditional medium of marketing, to maintain a stronghold in the market (Bagga & Bhatt, 2013). Businesses need to change their way of marketing with the rapid advancement of technology. One of the important ways to market the product is the customer itself where he writes a review about the product, gives a rating, and recommends it to others. Increasingly, social proof is being utilized by platforms such as Amazon and Flipkart, as well as social commerce channels, to establish trust and increase sales. This highlights the significance of social proof in highly competitive e-commerce.

The popularity of online shopping is growing daily. With the growing online shopping, the reliance on online social proof, such as product reviews, ratings, testimonials, and user-generated content, is also increasing. So, it is also necessary to study the motivational drivers behind the adoption of online Social Proof in consumer decision-making.

Despite the expanding importance of social proof in consumer decision-making, the underlying motivations behind its adoption remain understudied. So, following are the main objectives of the current study:

- To identify and examine the key motivational factors that influence the adoption of social proof among e-commerce consumers.
- To evaluate the strength and significance of relationships among key constructs influencing consumer adoption of online social proof.

2. Literature Review

In e-commerce, social proof has become an important aspect of influencing consumer purchasing decisions. Online consumer reviews, ratings, and user-generated content function as an indicator of trustworthiness, product quality, and authenticity, minimising the ambiguity inherent in digital buying environments. This section of the literature covers the key theoretical foundations and empirical findings from the literature related to the adoption of online social proof and its motivational drivers.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

The social proof relies on several recognised theories to explain its impact on consumer buying behaviour:

2.1.1 Social Influence Theory:

According to Elliot Aronson (1972;2008), humans are The Social Animals. Our behavior is largely influenced by others' attitudes and actions. Humans engage and influence one another in a variety of ways, both freely and involuntarily (Kalia et al., 2023). Social influence refers to a shift in an individual's beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors due to interactions with others or groups (Rashotte, 2007). Online buyers can simply acquire extensive information from experts with recent knowledge on a specific topic. According to Deutsch & Gerard (1955), Social influence can be of two types, informational and normative social influence. Informational social influence refers to taking information or guidance from someone who was not previously known as a friend or colleague (Lee et al., 2011) whereas a normative social influence is conforming to someone else's favorable expectations (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). In e-commerce, customers can gather information about items and services from a wide, geographically distributed population who have purchased and used them (Lee et al., 2011). This is a kind of informational social influence, where a consumer gets information about a product in the form of reviews, ratings, and recommendations from a person who has previously bought the same product. So as per social influence theory, others' opinions can impact the customers' purchase decisions (Lee et al., 2011). In e-commerce, online reviews,

ratings, and user-generated content are the kinds of social influence, that can impact the buying behavior of others.

2.1.2 Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM):

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposed by Petty & Cacioppo (1986), offers a valuable framework for analyzing persuasive communication success. As per ELM, consumer attitude change can occur through two paths of influence: central and peripheral routes (Sher & Lee, 2009).When consumers lack the motivation or skills to thoroughly analyze information, they rely on peripheral indicators like online consumer reviews and ratings to help them make decisions. With high desire and ability, the possibility of elaboration likelihood is high, which means that consumers tend to conduct a deeper and more aware study of issue-relevant information directly related to their behavior whereas in contrast, with poor motivation and low ability, elaboration likelihood is low, and consumers frequently create their attitude or conclusion based on some simple or peripheral cues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).In online shopping, elements such as the number of reviews, average star ratings, and titles like "Best Seller" serve as peripheral cues, directing selections without requiring extensive investigation.

2.1.3 Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) given by Ajzen (1985; 1991) is an extended version of the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen,1980). TPB is a popular framework for predicting and explaining human behavior in various settings, including consumer decision-making. This theory states that individual behavior can be determined by three factors: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Attitude means the degree to which a person has a positive or negative evaluation of a particular behavior (Azjen & Fishbein, 1980). Consumer attitudes toward online shopping are formed based on their perceptions of the benefits like convenience, a variety of products, etc., and downsides due to risk, lack of trust, and lack of physical inspection, etc. According to Azjen & Fishein (1980), subjective norms are beliefs about whether the majority of individuals accept or reject a particular behavior. The concept of social proof is strongly related to the factor of subjective norms as consumers often consider the opinions, reviews, and ratings of others when making their purchasing decisions while online shopping. Perceived behavioral control (PBC) is defined as an individual's assessment of the difficulty in doing or carrying out the needed behavior of interest (Ajzen, 1991). Perceived behavioral control (PBC) in e-commerce refers to the simplicity with which product information, websites, and transactions can be accessed and completed. A higher PBC is frequently associated with stronger behavioral goals.

2.2 Motivational Factors of Social Proof Adoption

This section covers the factors which can be the motivational dimension for the adoption of social proof while online shopping.

2.2.1 Trust and Credibility:

Trust is described as a propensity to rely on a person in whom one believes (Moorman et al., 2010), whereas Credibility refers to trust and generosity in online reviews and opinions (Arora & Sharma, 2018).In online shopping trust is a major factor that can influence the consumer's decision to purchase a product (Jin et al., 2014). It is an intermediary between e-retailer quality and consumer intention to purchase online, with system and service quality favourably increasing trust (Chuang & Fan, 2011).Consumers' purchasing decisions are typically heavily impacted by those they know and trust (Kim & Srivastava, 2007). Online reviews are important in e-commerce as they help develop trust and credibility, influencing consumer decisions. Trust and perceived usefulness are the factors that influence online shopping behavior in e-commerce (Jin et al., 2014). The trust serves as a link between social commerce and purchase intent. Social commerce systems facilitate interaction between consumers and businesses, increasing trust and buying intent (Wang & Zhang, 2012).

Credibility is one of the most significant criteria for evaluating the quality of provided information (Bae & Lee, 2011)). Today, the majority of consumers utilize the internet to look for products and product-related information, whether they purchase immediately on the website or subsequently offline. During the exploration process, consumers often accept reliable opinions from other consumers (Arora & Sharma, 2018). Taking into consideration the above discussions, the proposed hypotheses for the study is:
H1: Trust and Credibility have a positive and significant effect on the adoption of online social proof.

2.2.2 Perceived Risk

Risk and uncertainty are the main barriers to online shopping. Perceived risk refers to the potential for loss when seeking a desired objective through online purchase (Masoud, 2013). Consumers are hesitant to perform basic online purchase transactions, mostly due to risk concerns (Pavlou, 2001).Online shopping can be riskier and less trustworthy than in-person shopping due to the lack of tangible product quality indicators and face-to-face interaction with sales staff. Additionally, security and privacy concerns can impact the purchase process (Laroche et al., 2005). The risks stem from buyers' lack of faith in internet suppliers' integrity (Vos et al., 2014). When consumers perceive a risk, they seek strategies to mitigate it (Yadav et al., 2024).Given the perceived risk associated with online purchasing, many potential Internet buyers tend to wait and examine the experiences of those who have tried it before considering adopting it (Lee et al., 2006). In this scenario, online social proof like reviews, ratings, and user-generated content can help in reducing risk perception. Based on the above discussions, the proposed hypothesis is:
H2: Perceived risk has a positive and significant effect on the adoption of online social proof.

2.2.3 Social Influence

Social influence refers to how people change their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours after interacting with others who are perceived as similar or experts who are recognised as knowledgeable about the product (Amblee & Bui, 2011). Consumers increasingly rely on social media members' opinions and recommendations when making shopping decisions (Fu et al., 2020). E-commerce corporations promote web-based social communities where customers can share their experiences through reviews, ratings, and discussion (Kim & Srivastava, 2007). These online reviews help consumers decide whether to purchase a product. In e-commerce, buying decisions are generally affected by friends, acquaintances, and business partners, not strangers. Social influence has a tremendous impact on customers' online purchase habits. Positive statements in online forums can reinforce the relationship among beliefs, attitudes, and intentions to shop online (Lee et al., 2011). Family, friends' recommendations, and third-party endorsements stimulate and support the development of online buying (Alshehri & Meziane, 2015). The favourable informational social influence improves links between perceived ease of use, consumer attitude, and propensity to shop online (Lee et al., 2006). The above discussion underscores the role of social influence in minimising perceived dangers associated with online purchasing and implies that potential buyers frequently rely on others' experiences before adopting this activity themselves. Taking into consideration the above discussions, the proposed hypotheses for the study is:
H3: Social Influence has a positive and significant effect on the adoption of online social proof.

2.2.4 Convenience

The concept of bounded rationality emphasises that consumers frequently attempt to simplify decision-making in complex contexts. As the variety of products available in online shopping has many advantages, it also complicates things for customers. So, customers increasingly rely on online reviews, suggestions, and peer opinions when making purchasing decisions (Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016). This online social proof helps customers make quick and efficient decisions. With the rise of the Internet and electronic commerce, online

customer reviews have become a significant source of information for consumers when making purchasing decisions (Zhang et al., 2014). In online shopping, reviews, ratings, recommendations, and suggestion systems are popular social purchasing platforms due to their ease of use and ability to aggregate feedback (Amblee & Bui, 2011). The proposed hypotheses for the study is:
H4: Convenience has a positive and significant effect on the adoption of online social proof.

2.4.5 Perceived Quality

Online social proof can influence perceptions of product quality and value. Online experiences lack human interaction, making certain service quality characteristics meaningless for virtual operations (Cox & Dale, 2007). Online reviews have become an important source of information for consumers making purchasing decisions, influencing their perception of product quality (Gobinath & Gupta, 2016). People can obtain information anytime and anywhere through the usage of the Internet, it is legitimate to assert that people may navigate on the Internet to look for product information before doing transactions (Chang et al., 2015). Several aspects influence the perceived quality of information from online reviews, such as informativeness, persuasiveness, source legitimacy, and attitude toward reviews (Gobinath & Gupta, 2016). Extreme ratings have a greater impact on perceived quality than median ratings, with negative evaluations carrying more weight than positive ones (Shen et al., 2012).In online shopping, consumers use reviews and ratings to assess the quality of things they cannot personally see. Based on the above discussions, the proposed hypotheses for the study is:
H5: Perceived quality has a positive and significant effect on the adoption of online social proof.

3. Research Gap

Even though a lot of research has been conducted on online social proof and its effects on customers' purchasing decisions, there remains a gap in understanding the motivational drivers underlying its adoption in consumers' decision-making processes. The majority of the work that has already been written has focused on the results of social proof, such as how it affects purchase intention and behaviour, while mainly ignoring the basic question of why customers decide to rely on social proof in the first place. Specifically, there is a lack of empirically supported research that methodically investigates the behavioural and psychological factors—such as trust and credibility, perceived quality, perceived risk, social influence and convenience—that influence consumers to use online social proof as a tool for making decisions. This disparity emphasises the need for a more motivation-focused and integrative approach to better explain why consumers rely on social evidence in the changing context of digital commerce.

Based on the above Literature Proposed research model for the study is:

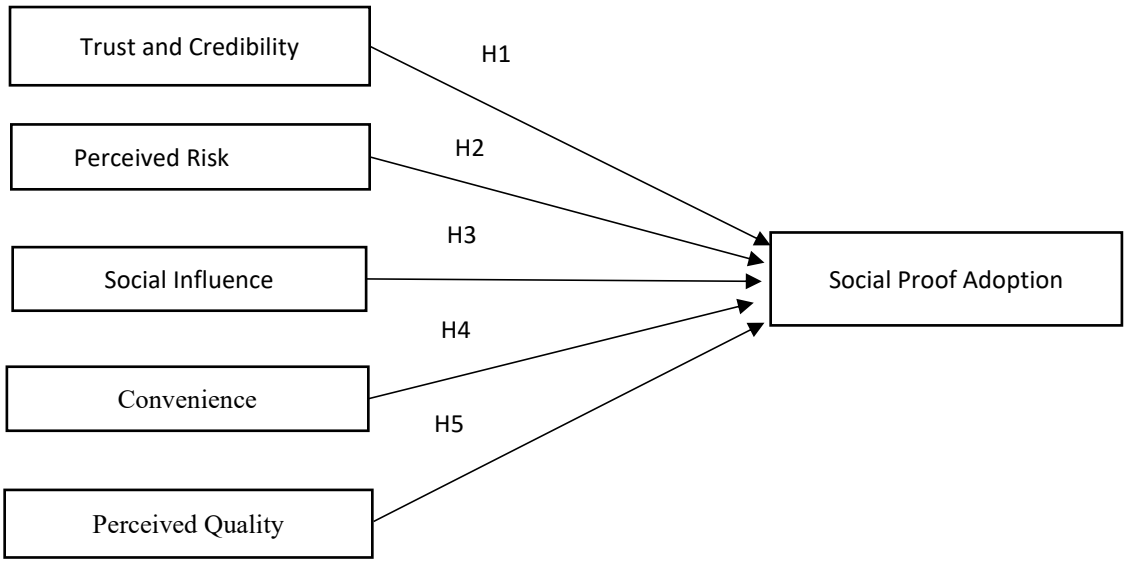

Figure 1. Proposed Research Model

4. Research Methodology

The present study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional research approach to evaluate the motivational drivers behind consumers' adoption of online social proof in e-commerce. A standardised questionnaire was designed to assess the constructs. The questionnaire was administered using Google Forms, making it accessible and convenient for the respondents who engage in online shopping. The survey instrument had two portions. The first section of the questionnaire includes the demographic details of the respondents, including age, gender, average monthly spending, frequency of purchases, frequently purchased products and preferred e-commerce platforms. The second segment included statements rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)".

To verify content validity, each construct was operationalised with a variety of reflective measures drawn from prior studies. For example, perceived quality and trust items were collected from the literature on e-commerce trust and social proof (Baek et al., 2012; Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Park et al., 2007).

The study's demographic consists of consumers who are generally purchase from the e-commerce platforms. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that participants had relevant experience with online social proof cues such as product reviews, ratings, or influencer recommendations. The minimum sample size for PLS-SEM analysis should be at least 10 times the largest number of structural path towards any latent construct (Hair et al., 2020). In the current model, five exogenous factors influence one endogenous construct (Social Proof Adoption); the minimum sample size is 50 observations. To improve statistical power and generalizability, the study targeted 350 respondents, as recommended for complicated PLS-SEM models. But due to non-response or incomplete submission, only 323 valid responses were obtained. Smart PLS 4.0 was used for data analysis, which included Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The PLS-SEM technique was chosen because it is appropriate for exploratory and predictive research models with numerous latent components. The analysis was done in two steps. Evaluate measurement model reliability, internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability), and convergent and discriminant validity with AVE. Second, we have analysed path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values with bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) to assess the significance of predicted correlations.

5. Results And Discussion

This section covers the findings and discussion of results that come out from the collected data.

5.1 Demographic profile of respondents

Table 1: *Demographics of the respondents*

Variables	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	133	41.2
	Female	190	58.8
Age	18-25	216	66.9
	26-35	94	29.1
	Above 35	13	4.0
Shopping Frequency	Daily	6	1.9
	Weekly	50	15.5
	Monthly	122	37.8
	Occasionally	109	33.7
	Rarely	36	11.1
Average Monthly Spending	Less than ₹1,000	90	27.9
	₹1,000–₹5,000	170	52.6
	₹5,001–₹10,000	132	9.9
	Above ₹10,000	31	9.6
Frequently Purchase Products	Electronics	53	16.4
	Fashion and Apparel	180	55.7
	Home and Kitchen Products	25	7.7
	Beauty and Personal Care	18	5.6
	Groceries	47	14.6

The study included 323 respondents, out of whom 41.2% were male and 58.8% were female, which indicates a greater participation of females in online shopping. If considering age, a majority of respondents were aged 18–25 years (66.9%), followed by 26–35 years (29.1%), indicating the dominance of younger consumers. Most of the respondents shopped monthly (37.8%) or occasionally (33.7%), indicating moderate shopping frequency. In terms of spending, over half (52.6%) reported a monthly expenditure between ₹1,000–₹5,000, while 27.9% spent less than ₹1,000. Regarding the preference of product category, fashion and apparel (55.7%) were the most frequently purchased items, followed by electronics (16.4%). Overall, the respondents represent young, moderately spending consumers who shop online regularly, primarily for fashion and lifestyle products.

5.2 Constructs Reliability and Validity

Table 2. *Constructs Reliability and Validity*

Code	Variable	Cronbach 's alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_a)	Composite Reliability (rho_c)	AVE
TC	Trust and Credibility	0.918	0.927	0.939	0.754
PR	Perceived Risk	0.902	0.91	0.932	0.774
SI	Social Influence	0.873	0.884	0.913	0.724
CN	Convenience	0.908	0.912	0.935	0.784

PQ	Perceived Quality	0.835	0.848	0.89	0.669
SPA	Social Proof Adoption	0.911	0.915	0.937	0.790

Table 2 displays the findings from the analysis of the constructs' reliability and validity for all six variables that affect the adoption of online social proof in e-commerce. The Cronbach alpha and Composite Reliability values of all the constructs range from 0.835 to 0.918, which is significantly higher than the recommended threshold of 0.70. This demonstrates a strong internal consistency and reliability among the items used to assess each construct. This indicates that participants uniformly interpret the items, and the scales effectively measure the intended dimensions. Also, the value of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) lies between the range of 0.669 to o.790, which exceeds the minimum allowable threshold level of 0.50. The results indicate that each construct explains a significant percentage of the variance in the observed indicators. The highest AVE of Social Proof Adoption (0.790) shows that all measurement items strongly represent consumers' reliance on social proof cues such as online reviews, ratings and recommendations during their purchase decision-making. Overall, the results show that all constructs have excellent reliability and convergent validity, indicating that the measurement model is suitable for subsequent structural equation modelling.

5.3 Structural Path Coefficients

Table 3. *Path coefficient analysis relationship*

Hypotheses	Path	Beta	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	TC → SPA	0.155	2.611	0.009	Supported
H2	PR → SPA	0.177	2.072	0.038	Supported
H3	SI → SPA	-0.161	2.679	0.007	Supported (Negative)
H4	CN → SPA	0.295	4.092	0.000	Supported
H5	PQ → SPA	0.486	7.326	0.000	Supported

Note: TC = Trust and Credibility, PR = Perceived Risk, SI = Social Influence, CN = Convenience, PQ = Perceived Quality, SPA = Social Proof Adoption.

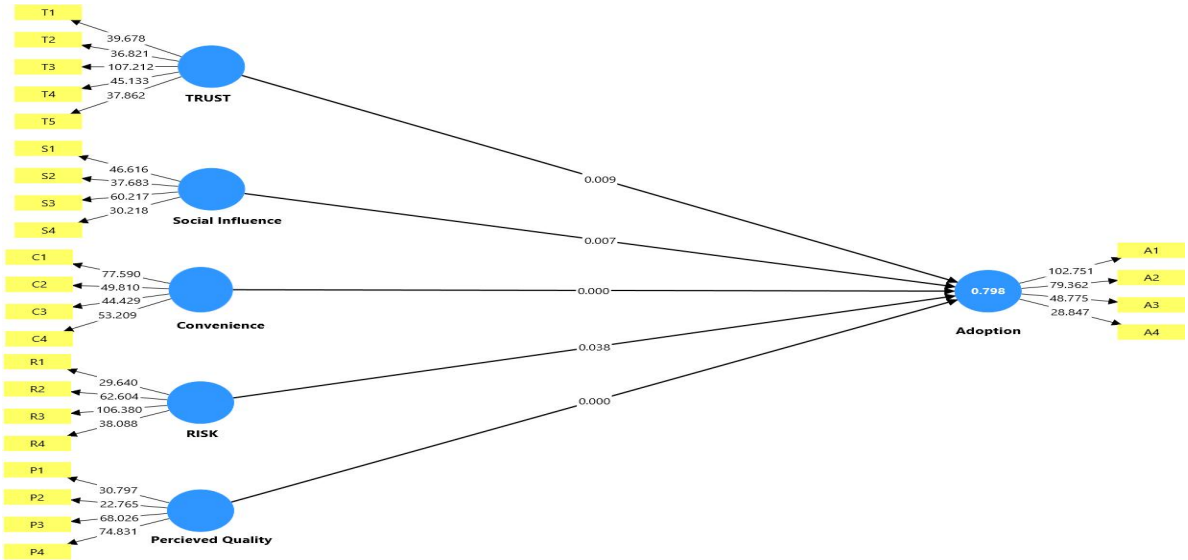

Figure 2. Structural Path Coefficients

The structural model was tested to examine the hypothesised relationships between the latent constructs influencing Social Proof Adoption (SPA). Table 3 presents the standardised path coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values obtained through SEM analysis.

The findings show that Trust and credibility have a significant influence on social proof adoption (β = 0.155, t = 2.611, p = 0.009). It shows that higher degrees of trustworthiness and credibility associated with online platforms or information sources increase users' propensity to adopt social proof cues during their purchase decisions. The findings of the present study are consistent with the previous studies (Chuang & Fan, 2011; Jin et al., 2014; Moorman et al., 2010; Pavlou, 2001; Vos et al., 2014) , which argued that trust remains a critical factor in consumer acceptance of social information. Similarly, Perceived Risk (PR) was found to have a significant positive effect on Social Proof Adoption (β = 0.177, t = 2.072, p = 0.038), supporting H2. This result indicates that when consumers perceive a higher degree of risk in online shopping, they tend to rely more on social proof elements, such as reviews, ratings, and user testimonials, to mitigate uncertainty. The findings are consistent with prior research by (Masoud, 2013; Vos et al., 2014; Yadav et al., 2024), which found that customers rely on social evidence to alleviate uncertainties in online shopping, and that online reviews act as a risk reduction tool and aid to create confidence in online shopping. Interestingly, Social Influence (SI) demonstrated a negative yet significant effect on Social Proof Adoption (β = -0.161, t = 2.679, p = 0.007), thus supporting H3 in the opposite direction. This shows that consumers who are subjected to greater external social pressures may be less likely to independently adopt social proof cues, possibly due to an overreliance on social conformity rather than own examination of online information. The findings contradicted with prior studies by (Alshehri & Meziane, 2015; Kim & Srivastava, 2007; Lee et al., 2006) who find out a positive impact of social cues on consumers behaviour. This disparity could be attributable due to consumers' rising awareness of bogus and fake reviews, manipulated endorsements, and overexposure to social pressure on digital platforms that can lead to scepticism and selective reliance on social proof (Sher & Lee, 2009) In contrast, Convenience indicates a strong positive and significant relationship with Social Proof Adoption (β = 0.295, t = 4.092, p < 0.001), confirming H4. The findings are similar to the research by (Bagga & Bhatt, 2013; Constantinides & Holleschovsky, 2016) who find out that ease of access and time efficiency are crucial to online decision-making. These findings collectively reaffirm the relevance of platform usability and information accessibility as significant facilitators in the adoption of social proof. Lastly, Perceived Quality (PQ) also found as the most influential predictor of Social Proof Adoption (β = 0.486, t = 7.326, p < 0.001), thereby supporting H5. The findings are consistent with prior studies by (Baek et al., 2012; Chang et al., 2015) who emphasized that consumers who perceive high-quality items or services are substantially more receptive to social proof that reinforce their confidence and satisfaction with the purchasing process. Overall, these findings indicates that trust, perceived risk, convenience, and perceived quality positively influence social proof adoption, whereas social influence shows an inverse relationship.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

In conclusion, the study successfully validates the proposed model, examining the factors of Social Proof Adoption in online shopping contexts. All hypothesised relationships were supported, with Trust and Credibility, Perceived Risk, Convenience, and Perceived Quality positively influencing social proof adoption, while Social Influence indicates a significant but negative correlation. These results are consistent with the study's goal of determining the psychological elements that influence consumers' reliance on social proof cues while making online shopping decision. The findings suggest that consumers are more likely to adopt social proof when they perceive trust, convenience, and quality, and when social influence is balanced with personal individual judgment. Overall, the findings advance knowledge in

academia and real-world applications of social proof as a potent instrument for digital consumer interaction and decision-making.

6.2 Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The findings of the study contributed in both a theoretical and managerial point of view.
From a theoretical standpoint, these results contribute to the expanding literature on consumer psychology and the adoption of social proof by demonstrating that consumers' behavioural responses in online environments are significantly influenced by both contextual (convenience and social influence) and cognitive (trust, risk perception, and quality assessment) factors. The negative impact social influence offers an intriguing counterpoint to earlier studies, indicating that too much external persuasion may lessen consumers' independent reliance on social proof cues. This highlights the necessity of striking a balance between individual cognition and social conformity in digital marketing models.
From a managerial standpoint, in order to promote increased acceptance of social proof, e-commerce platforms and marketers should concentrate on enhancing website convenience, decreasing perceived risk, and establishing trust and credibility. Focusing on genuine, high-quality user-generated content can further reinforce consumers' perceptions of product quality. Additionally, keeping an intuitive interface and ensuring transparency can improve consumers' decision-making efficiency, which will boost their confidence in using social proof while doing online shopping.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research Agenda

Although the current study offers valuable insights into the variables impacting the adoption of online social proof, it has several limitations that create opportunities for further investigation. First, the study's findings may not be as broadly applicable as they may be due to its relatively small sample size of 323 online buyers. In order to improve external validity, future studies can overcome this constraint by employing larger and more varied samples from a variety of demographic groupings. Another limitation of the study is the use of a cross-sectional research design, which records consumer opinions at a particular point in time and limits the capacity to see behavioural changes. Longitudinal designs may be used in future studies to examine how reliance on social evidence changes over time, especially in light of rising digital knowledge and exposure to counterfeit evaluations. Addressing these limitations will significantly strengthen the theoretical and managerial contributions of future research in this domain.

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