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Mediating Role of Brand Awareness in the Relationship Between Social Commerce Determinants and Business Performance Among Micro Foodpreneurs in Malaysia

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Abstract

The proliferation of social commerce has transformed the operational landscape for micro-enterprises, yet empirical understanding of how social commerce activities translate into tangible business outcomes remains limited. This study examines the influence of social commerce determinants on business performance through the mediating role of brand awareness among micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia. Drawing upon the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Theory and Social Exchange Theory (SET), this study investigates the effects of reviews and ratings, social media engagement, social media influencers, and convenience on business performance and brand awareness. A quantitative research design was employed using survey data collected from 330 Malaysian micro foodpreneurs. Data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that social commerce determinants do not exert significant direct effects on business performance. However, all four determinants significantly and positively influence brand awareness. Furthermore, brand awareness significantly affects business performance and mediates the relationships between social commerce determinants and performance outcomes. Convenience demonstrates the strongest mediation effect, while reviews and ratings and influencers exhibit marginal mediation effects. The findings suggest that social commerce contributes to business success primarily through brand-building mechanisms rather than direct transactional outcomes. This study extends existing social commerce literature by positioning brand awareness as a central explanatory construct and offers practical implications for micro foodpreneurs seeking sustainable growth in digital commerce environments.

Keywords: Social Commerce, Brand Awareness, Business Performance, Micro Foodpreneurs, PLS-SEM, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has fundamentally altered consumer engagement, with social commerce integrating social media and commercial transactions (Xu & Jia, 2025). For micro-enterprises, social commerce provides affordable customer access, levelling the playing field (Alnoor et al., 2026). Malaysian micro foodpreneurs increasingly use Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, with TikTok Shop reporting 130% sales growth under "#JomLokal" (TikTok Shop, 2025). Yet empirical evidence on social commerce effectiveness remains inconclusive (Moksin et al., 2023). While studies assume direct performance impacts, emerging evidence suggests social commerce primarily influences intermediate branding outcomes (Chen et al., 2024). Brand awareness drives consumer purchasing (Noor et al., 2026), and social commerce features may contribute to performance through brand awareness rather than immediate transactions (Alnoor et al., 2026). This study examines whether brand awareness mediates the relationship between four social commerce determinants reviews, engagement, influencers, convenience and business performance among Malaysian micro foodpreneurs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Commerce

Social commerce involves commercial activities on social media where consumers create and share content influencing purchasing decisions (Xu & Jia, 2025). Unlike traditional e-commerce, it emphasises social interaction, user-generated content, and community engagement (Chen et al., 2024). Platforms now incorporate sophisticated commercial features enabling seamless transactions alongside social interactions (Alnoor et al., 2026). This study focuses on four determinants reviews and ratings, social media engagement, influencers, and convenience selected for theoretical relevance to SOR and SET theories and practical significance in the Malaysian micro-foodpreneur context (Noor et al., 2026).

Reviews and Ratings

Reviews and ratings constitute electronic word-of-mouth mechanisms that reduce purchase uncertainty and influence consumer decision-making (Chen et al., 2024). In social commerce environments, reviews and ratings serve as credible signals that inform potential customers about product quality and seller reliability (Xu & Jia, 2025). Research suggests that reviews and ratings contribute substantially to brand-building efforts by enhancing perceived credibility and increasing brand recognition (Moksin et al., 2023). Furthermore, the volume and valence of reviews influence consumers' information processing and decision-making, with higher review volumes associated with increased brand visibility and market performance (Alnoor et al., 2026).

Social Media Engagement

Social media engagement encompasses consumer-brand interactions liking, commenting, sharing, and discussions (Noor et al., 2026). It extends beyond passive content consumption (Chen et al., 2024) and facilitates communication, fostering stronger brand connections (Alnoor et al., 2026). However, engagement alone does not directly translate to performance without meaningful branding outcomes (Moksin et al., 2023), as it does not significantly affect Malaysian SME sales performance unless coupled with effective brand-building strategies (Noor et al.,

2026). Engaged consumers contribute to brand awareness through conversations, content sharing, and recommendations (Xu & Jia, 2025).

Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers are individuals with substantial online followings who influence consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions (Alnoor et al., 2026). As opinion leaders, their endorsements strengthen brand recognition and credibility (Noor et al., 2026). Research confirms influencer effectiveness in shaping consumer perceptions (Chen et al., 2024), with influencers perceived as more authentic than traditional advertising (Xu & Jia, 2025). Alnoor et al. (2026) found that parasocial interaction and professionalism significantly influence trust in live-stream selling. These parasocial relationships enhance endorsement effectiveness, making influencer marketing a powerful tool for building brand awareness (Noor et al., 2026).

Convenience

Convenience refers to ease of accessing products, obtaining information, communicating with sellers, and completing transactions (Alnoor et al., 2026). In social commerce, it encompasses platform usability, transaction efficiency, and information accessibility (Chen et al., 2024). Convenient platforms create positive experiences and enhance professionalism perceptions (Noor et al., 2026). Recognised as a critical determinant of satisfaction and loyalty (Xu & Jia, 2025), convenience influences brand perceptions as consumers associate ease of use with quality (Moksin et al., 2023). Thus, social commerce convenience contributes to brand awareness through positive interactions enhancing recall and recognition (Alnoor et al., 2026).

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to consumers' ability to recognise and recall a brand under different conditions (Noor et al., 2026). As one of the core dimensions of brand equity, brand awareness enhances familiarity, trust, and purchase likelihood (Moksin et al., 2023). Brands with high awareness enjoy stronger market presence, competitive advantage, and consumer preference (Alnoor et al., 2026). Brand awareness operates through recognition and recalls mechanisms that influence consumer decision-making processes (Chen et al., 2024). When consumers are familiar with a brand, they demonstrate higher levels of trust, reduced perceived risk, and increased purchase intention (Xu & Jia, 2025). Moksin et al. (2023) found that while brand awareness correlates strongly with sales performance, its direct effect may be mediated by other factors (Noor et al., 2026). The development of brand awareness requires consistent exposure and positive associations, processes that can be facilitated through social commerce activities (Alnoor et al., 2026).

Business Performance

Business performance represents the extent to which firms achieve desired organisational outcomes, including sales growth, profitability, customer retention, and overall competitiveness (Moksin et al., 2023). For micro-enterprises, performance is particularly influenced by customer perceptions and market visibility, as limited resources constrain their ability to compete through other means (Noor et al., 2026). Performance measurement in micro-enterprise contexts requires consideration of both financial and non-financial indicators, as financial metrics

alone may not capture the full picture of business success (Chen et al., 2024). Social commerce outcomes such as customer engagement and brand awareness represent intermediate performance indicators that precede financial outcomes (Alnoor et al., 2026). Understanding the relationship between social commerce activities and business performance requires examination of these intermediate mechanisms (Xu & Jia, 2025).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The Stimulus–Organism–Response Theory (SOR)

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model conceptualised by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), explains how environmental stimuli evoke emotional and cognitive reactions (organism) that shape behavioural responses (Zhu et al., 2020). This model has been widely applied in consumer research to trace how environmental inputs translate into outcomes through psychological processing (Hochreiter et al., 2023). In Malaysian foodservice literature, SOR has been validated to explain how venue or product attributes affect customer evaluations and downstream behaviours (Nor et al., 2024). In this research, digital marketplace cues reviews and ratings, influencers, convenience, and engagement are conceptualised as stimuli (S). Brand awareness captures the internal cognitive affective state (O) formed from repeated, credible exposure. The response (R) is micro foodpreneurs' performance, reflected in sales, repeat patronage, and eWOM outcomes (Marolt et al., 2022). Stronger brand awareness cultivated through relevant digital stimuli enhances consumers' likelihood of supporting, purchasing from, and advocating for micro foodpreneurs. The S-O-R model thus provides a robust foundation for examining how digital stimuli influence brand-related internal states and ultimately drive performance.

Conceptualisation of Research Constructs

- a) Reviews and Ratings → Brand Awareness: Online reviews signal credibility and quality, reducing uncertainty and strengthening brand awareness through repeated exposure (Sepac et al., 2024). Malaysian evidence confirms reviews shape dining decisions (Arnieyantie et al., 2020).
- b) Social Media Influencers → Brand Awareness: Influencers as opinion leaders shift consumer attitudes and brand outcomes (Bhardwaj et al., 2024). Malaysian research links influencer reviews to patronisation decisions (Kedin et al., 2024)
- c) Convenience → Brand Awareness: Digital convenience drives platform usage, reinforcing brand recognition (Chowdhury, 2023). Malaysian evidence links convenience drivers to expanded brand visibility (Syakinah et al., 2025).
- d) Social Media Engagement → Brand Awareness: Engagement activities enhance brand memorability. Social media marketing elements significantly lift brand awareness (Marolt et al., 2022).
- e) Brand Awareness → Micro Foodpreneurs' Performance: Social media improves performance indirectly through brand awareness gains, supporting loyalty and sales (Marolt et al., 2022; Akther et al., 2022).

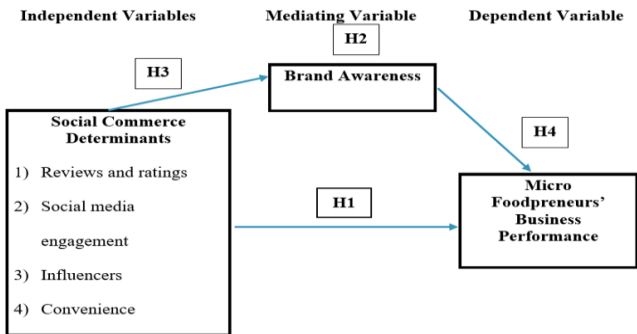
Social Exchange Theory (SET)

This research employs Social Exchange Theory (SET) to explain how social commerce determinants reviews, influencer endorsements, engagement, and convenience affect micro foodpreneurs' performance, with brand awareness as a mediator. SET analyses reciprocal relationships in digital commerce, where interactions are shaped by perceived benefits and costs (Ahmad et al., 2023). Individuals engage in exchanges when benefits outweigh costs, fostering mutual trust and commitment (Cropanzano et al., 2023). Within social commerce, entrepreneurs offer value through quality, convenience, and engaging content, while consumers reciprocate through attention, engagement, and purchases. When social commerce determinants enhance brand visibility, consumers develop familiarity and trust foundations to loyalty and repeat purchases (Munir & Watts, 2025). This reduces uncertainty and strengthens perceived benefits, improving performance. SET captures the reciprocal nature of social commerce: entrepreneurs create value; consumers reciprocate through advocacy and purchases. Brand awareness mediates this process by reinforcing trust and reducing perceived risk, translating social interactions into tangible outcomes.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between key social commerce determinants (independent variables), brand awareness (mediator), and business performance (dependent variable) for micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia. The independent posited to positively influence business performance through social commerce practices, with brand awareness serving as the mediating mechanism.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Develop by researcher for this study

HYPHOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Hypothesis 1: Social commerce determinants (reviews and ratings, social media engagement, influencers, and convenience) have a positive effect on micro foodpreneurs' business performance.

Social commerce leverages reviews, engagement, influencers, and convenience to enhance visibility, trust, and loyalty, thereby driving business performance among micro foodpreneurs (Galib et al., 2023; Jalaludin et al., 2023). Reviews attract customers and foster repeat purchases (Ahn & Lee, 2024), while engagement builds brand awareness and customer relationships (Mensah et al., 2023). Influencers amplify reach and credibility (Chen et al., 2024), and convenience reduces friction, encouraging repeat transactions (Bernama, 2023). Grounded in SOR Theory, these

determinants serve as environmental stimuli that directly trigger business performance outcomes.

Hypothesis 2: *Brand awareness mediates the relationship between social commerce activities and the business performance of micro foodpreneurs.*

Brand awareness reflects consumers' ability to identify a product, while consumer awareness encompasses knowledge of product attributes (Pratama et al., 2023). Malaysian micro foodpreneurs face resource constraints, but social commerce enhances visibility and engagement (Busalim et al., 2024). Brand awareness drives sales, loyalty, and market share (Munir & Watts, 2025). Social commerce activities build awareness and improve positioning (Chen et al., 2024). Business performance, measured through sales and retention (Mensah et al., 2023), improves when businesses leverage digital platforms for personalised interactions (Jalaludin et al., 2023). Convenience features reduce friction, strengthening the brand awareness-performance relationship (Bernama, 2023). SOR Theory positions social commerce determinants as stimuli influencing brand awareness (organism) and performance (response), while SET explains trust-building and reduced uncertainty in consumer-brand exchanges.

Hypothesis 3: *Reviews and ratings, social media engagement, influencers, and convenience positively influence the enhancement of brand awareness among micro foodpreneurs.*

Positive reviews signal quality and foster brand awareness (Ahn & Lee, 2024). User-generated content impacts trust and recognition (Galib et al., 2023). Engagement activities extend reach and boost algorithmic ranking (Mensah et al., 2023); consistent engagement builds loyalty (Busalim et al., 2024). Influencer marketing amplifies exposure, with 56% of consumers purchasing based on recommendations (Han et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024). Convenience reduces friction and encourages repeat purchases (Bernama, 2023; Ahn & Lee, 2024). According to SOR Theory, these stimuli directly influence brand awareness before behavioural responses occur.

Hypothesis 4: *Brand awareness positively affects micro foodpreneurs' business performance.*

Active social commerce involvement fosters trust and recognition, strengthening brand associations and enhancing performance (Busalim et al., 2024). Brand awareness drives purchase intentions, loyalty, and repeat transactions, essential for profitability (Munir & Watts, 2025). Brand awareness mediates digital engagement's impact on financial outcomes (Chen et al., 2024). Social commerce platforms amplify awareness through influencer collaborations, user-generated content, and convenience (Galib et al., 2023; Bernama, 2023). SOR Theory positions brand awareness as the organism directly influencing performance (response), while SET explains trust-building, reduced risk, and enhanced perceived benefits motivating consumer reciprocity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Data Collection

A quantitative cross-sectional design examined relationships between social commerce determinants, brand awareness, and business performance, enabling statistical analysis and generalisation (Saunders et al., 2019). Data were collected from 330 Malaysian micro foodpreneurs using a structured questionnaire and purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015), exceeding PLS-

SEM requirements (Hair et al., 2019). Distribution through social media groups and associations occurred over three months with follow-ups (Dillman et al., 2014). Respondents received study information and confidentiality assurances.

Measurement Instruments

The questionnaire measured six constructs: reviews and ratings, social media engagement, social media influencers, convenience, brand awareness, and business performance. All constructs used established scales adapted from prior literature (Chen et al., 2024). All items used a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was pre-tested with micro foodpreneurs to identify ambiguities (DeVellis, 2017).

Data Analysis

Data analysis used SmartPLS 4.0 for variance-based SEM, suitable for complex mediation relationships (Hair et al., 2019). PLS-SEM was appropriate for this exploratory, prediction-oriented study with a complex model (Sarstedt et al., 2014). A two-stage approach was followed: measurement model and structural model assessment (Hair et al., 2019). Measurement model evaluation assessed internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha and CR > 0.70), convergent validity (AVE > 0.50) and discriminant validity (HTMT < 0.85; Henseler et al., 2015). Structural model assessment examined path coefficients, R², f², and Q² (Hair et al., 2019), with mediation tested via bootstrapping (5,000 subsamples).

FINDINGS

The respondent profile provides important context for interpreting the findings. Most respondents were male (58.4%), while females represented 41.6% of the sample. Most respondents were aged between 35 and 54 years, indicating that micro foodpreneurs in Malaysia typically operate during their prime working years. The majority possessed secondary school education (63.9%), suggesting that formal education levels are relatively modest among this population.

Table 2 Respondents Profile

Demographic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (percent)
Gender	Male	193	58.4
	Female	137	61.9
Age	Below 25	2	0.61
	25–34	36	10.8
	35–44	124	37.7
Education	Diploma	70	21.1
	Degree	8	2.42
	Postgraduate	2	0.6
	Secondary School	211	63.9
	Primary School	40	11.98

Source: Respondents data from the survey

MEASUREMENT MODEL ASSESSMENT

The measurement model demonstrated strong reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha values (0.913–0.981) and composite reliability values exceeded the recommended thresholds, confirming internal consistency consistent with Malaysian SME studies (Moksin et al., 2023). Convergent validity was established

as all item loadings exceeded 0.70 and AVE values (0.758–0.928) exceeded 0.50. Discriminant validity was confirmed using the HTMT criterion, with all values below 0.85, indicating each construct is empirically distinct as presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (pc)	AVE	Interpretation
Brand awareness (BA)	0.976	0.981	0.912	Excellent
Business performance (BP)	0.961	0.970	0.865	Excellent
Convenience (CON)	0.956	0.966	0.852	Excellent
Reviews & Ratings (RR)	0.913	0.938	0.758	Good
Social media engagement (SME)	0.978	0.983	0.921	Excellent
Social Media Influencers (SMI)	0.981	0.985	0.928	Excellent

Table 4 Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

Construct	BA	BP	CON	RR	SME	SMI
BA	—					
BP	0.269	—				
CON	0.748	0.239	—			
RR	0.871	0.249	0.745	—		
SME	0.829	0.199	0.736	0.907	—	
SMI	0.628	0.126	0.344	0.682	0.655	—

that brand awareness mediates the relationship, though mediation strength varies across determinants.

STRUCTURAL MODEL ASSESSMENT

The structural model results revealed that none of the social commerce determinants significantly influenced business performance directly ($p > 0.05$), aligning with Moksin et al. (2023) who found no direct effects on Malaysian SME sales performance. However, all four determinants significantly influenced brand awareness, supporting H3a–H3d. Reviews and ratings showed the strongest influence ($\beta = 0.336$, $p < .001$), followed by convenience ($\beta = 0.279$, $p < .001$), social media engagement ($\beta = 0.207$, $p = .015$), and influencers ($\beta = 0.175$, $p < .001$). Brand awareness significantly influenced business performance ($\beta = 0.233$, $p = .021$), supporting H4 and confirming its importance as a driver of outcomes (Noor et al., 2026).

MEDIATION ANALYSIS

Mediation analysis revealed that brand awareness mediates the relationship between social commerce determinants and business performance. The strongest mediation effect was observed for convenience (indirect effect = 0.065, $p < .001$), underscoring the importance of platform usability in building brand perceptions (Alnoor et al., 2026). Reviews and ratings (indirect effect = 0.078, $p = .004$) and influencers (indirect effect = 0.041, $p = .013$) demonstrated marginal mediation effects. Social media engagement showed no significant mediation (indirect effect = 0.049, $p = .129$), consistent with Moksin et al. (2023) who found engagement alone does not significantly affect sales performance. These findings provide partial support for H2a–H2d, confirming

DISCUSSION

Findings reveal that social commerce determinants do not directly improve performance despite building brand awareness, aligning with evidence that social commerce influences intermediate branding outcomes rather than direct financial performance (Chen et al., 2024). Supporting underpinning theories, reviews, engagement, influencers, and convenience function as signals enhancing brand salience (Xu & Jia, 2025). Reviews and ratings were the strongest predictor, followed by convenience which creates positive experiences and professionalism perceptions (Noor et al., 2026). Social media engagement showed marginal mediation, requiring complementary brand-building mechanisms (Moksin et al., 2023). The study extends signalling theory to micro foodpreneurs, demonstrating brand awareness as the mediating mechanism in the social commerce-performance relationship (Alnoor et al., 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study examined social commerce determinants and business performance among Malaysian micro foodpreneurs. Findings reveal social commerce does not directly improve performance but enhances brand awareness, which subsequently drives business outcomes. Brand awareness emerges as the primary value-creation mechanism. The study contributes to social commerce, branding, and entrepreneurship literature, offering actionable recommendations for practitioners and policymakers. Future

research should explore additional mediators and moderator's consumer trust, perceived risk, platform characteristics (Chen et al., 2024) and longitudinal effects on brand development and performance (Noor et al., 2026).

ETHICS STATEMENTS

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Ethical approval was obtained from a Malaysian Private University Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to their participation in the study. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

AUTHOR STATEMENTS

This work was carried out solely and conceptualised by the author. The author developed the theoretical framework and hypotheses, designed the methodology, conducted data collection and analysis, and wrote all sections of the manuscript including the introduction, literature review, theoretical framework, findings, discussion and conclusion.

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