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The Influence of Social Commerce Dynamics on Sustainable Hotel Brand Image, Customer Engagement, and Booking Intentions

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Abstract: Social commerce plays a significant role in various aspects of the hotel industry. By using social commerce platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and hotel booking websites, hotels can enhance their brand visibility, engage more effectively with guests, and stimulate hotel bookings. Nonetheless, prior research reported a lack of studies in this area, namely social commerce in the context of domestic tourism. Drawing on Stimuli–Organism–Response (SOR) theory as being a well-established framework in social commerce research, this study seeks to examine the impact of social commerce on hotel booking intentions, both directly and indirectly, by considering the mediating effects of both brand image and customer engagement. This research used an online survey questionnaire as a tool for collecting primary data from domestic tourists in Egypt during the period from January to April 2024. The study sample encompassed 315 participants who were recruited using the convenience sampling technique. Using Smart PLS 4.0 software, Structural Equation Modeling was performed to examine the proposed model and hypotheses. The results highlighted the significant impact of social commerce on both hotel brand image and customer engagement, which in turn encouraged booking intentions among potential domestic guests. The results also supported the significant mediating effect of hotel brand image and customer engagement in the relationship between social commerce and hotel booking intentions. This study provides some theoretical contributions to the literature of hospitality management by addressing notable gaps in knowledge. This study also suggests some practical implications for industry executives that support their social commerce techniques and boost booking intentions and behavior among domestic tourists such as creating visually attractive content, sponsoring virtual mega events, actively interacting with social media followers, and incorporating booking functionalities in social media platforms. In so doing, hotels can boost their sustainable marketing practices to target a promising market segment by exploiting Web 2.0 capabilities.

Keywords: brand image; booking intentions; social commerce; customer engagement; sustainable marketing

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1. Introduction

The rapid advancement and widespread use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), particularly the Internet and digital technologies such as mobile phones and tablets, have revolutionized the ways business organizations approach customers by adopting one-on-one communication and e-commerce [1–5]. However, it was only the emergence of the second generation of the web, known as Web 2.0 applications, that enabled users/customers to interact with each other, share information, and generate content, which thereby caused the shift from one-on-one communication to virtual community-based marketing. This paradigm shift in the online interactions of users/customers yielded the advent of a new business model known as social commerce [1–4,6,7]. Social commerce is defined as the process of delivering business activities including buying and selling through social interactions and user contributions enabled by social media websites and Web 2.0 [1,3,6]. Among the various definitions of social commerce, this study adopts the definition provided by Huang and Benyoucef [8] as it has been used and successfully adopted in previous studies (such as [2,6,9,10]) and encompasses several social commerce models such as social shopping and group buying [11,12]. Huang and Benyoucef [8] defined social commerce as a form of commerce that allows customers to be actively involved in promoting and selling products/services by using capabilities powered by social media platforms [8].

The hotel industry always pursues different ways to build a strong and sustainable brand image and support sustainable customer engagement in order to stimulate demand and booking intentions, develop a competitive advantage, and ensure business sustainability and growth [13,14]. In this context, the prevalent use of social media platforms by millions of potential customers has encouraged hotels to utilize social commerce techniques to manage their online brand image and boost their interactions with guests in an endeavor to encourage guests' booking intentions and behaviors [14,15]. By integrating the functions of social media platforms into e-commerce websites, social commerce enables hotels to leverage these capabilities to better connect and interact with guests, manage guest perceptions of hotel brand image, and stimulate hotel booking intentions [16,17]. However, the application of social commerce in the hotel industry is still in the early stage of adoption [1], hence examining the changing dynamics of social commerce and how they may impact critical marketing results, such as the perceived brand image, consumer engagement, and purchase intentions, is significant to both academics and practitioners.

When approaching the concept of social commerce and its ramifications, the literature suggests a number of explanatory theories that can be adopted. Attar et al. [18] reported that social commerce has been predominantly considered through the lens of several theories such as Social Exchange Theory, Technology Acceptance Model, Social Support Theory, Reasoned Action Theory, and Planned Behavioral Theory. Stimuli–Organism–Response (SOR) theory is among the key theories to explain social commerce dynamics in the hotel industry setting. This theory denotes that an external incentive (stimulus) can result in a certain psychological state of an individual (organism), which in turn triggers behavior (response). Nevertheless, a few studies have embraced it, such as [19,20]. Thus, the current study adopts Stimuli–Organism–Response (SOR) theory [21,22] as an overarching framework to explain the variance or change in booking intentions (response) among potential domestic hotel guests (organism) as a result of using social commerce techniques (stimuli). Sarker et al. [23] reported that SOR theory is among the key conceptual models adopted in social commerce research. Raj et al. [24] explained that SOR theory can be utilized to examine the underlying connection between interrelated constructs.

Despite the significance of social commerce and its outcomes in the hotel industry, the relevant literature reported some gaps in this area. First, although some studies have investigated social commerce in the context of the hotel industry (such as [2,3,25–28]), some scholars [18,29] argued that social commerce is a complex, dynamic, and everchanging process that encompasses various tools and techniques, such as interactive platforms and customized recommendations. Such a complex and dynamic nature requires constant

investigations to detect any changes in its dynamics and consequently its potential outcomes. Likewise, Leong et al. [5] systematically reviewed 20 years of research in this area and reported that social commerce has become a primary research theme since 2017. Second, social commerce is a relatively new concept that is still in the early adoption stage and requires further investigations to explore its impact on customer behavior [2,30–32]. For instance, Dabbous et al. [31] claimed that little is known about online social interactions, customer engagement, and purchase intentions. Thus, further research can examine social commerce and its interrelated outcomes from different perspectives or through new lenses/theories [18]. Third, the majority of existing studies on social commerce and its outcomes were based on the tourism and hospitality industry in Western or developed countries with limited, if any, investigation of the issue in hotel settings in Eastern countries [33–40], leaving an interesting area for further exploration. Fourth, Egypt's population in 2024 is estimated at more than 106.5 million [36], compared to 11.4 million in Jordan and 12.5 million in Tunisia [41,42]. In 2022, Egypt's GDP per capita was USD 3764.5 [43]. Incoming tourism rates for Egypt in 2023 reached 14.906 million tourists, and while there are no specific counters for domestic tourism [44], domestic tourism constituted 86% of the global tourism market [36,37] and significantly contributed to the Egyptian GDP, with USD 11.1 billion compared to USD 6.9 billion generated from international tourist arrivals [37]. It is expected that domestic tourism will continue to grow and outperform inbound tourism due to several recent international incidents such as pandemics and geopolitical conflicts. Nonetheless, the domestic tourism market is usually overlooked by academics and undervalued by practitioners [36,37] with most tourism and hospitality enterprises prefer hosting international tourists for economic purposes [38–40]. The cities of Sharm El-Sheikh and the North Coast are considered among the most essential recreational tourism sites in Egypt, while Luxor is regarded as the center of cultural tourism in Egypt and the world, as it alone contains a third of the world's antiquities. With regard to digitization, the communications and information technology sector was the highest growing among the country's sectors in 2020/2021, as Egypt ranked first in the Middle East and North Africa in the global digital competitiveness ranking and advanced six places on the mobile Internet speed index in 2022, first in Africa. In terms of fixed Internet speed, Egypt ranked 85th on the fixed Internet speed index among 181 countries, and download speeds were estimated at 39.75 MB/s. In 2022, 51.45 million Egyptians used social media, of whom 44.7 used Facebook, 20.3 used TikTok, and 16 used Instagram [45].

To address the aforementioned gaps, this study aims to investigate the potential marketing outcomes of adopting social commerce dynamics in hotel settings in Egypt from the perspective of domestic tourists and through the lens of SOR theory. Specifically, this study develops and tests a conceptual model that examines the effects of social commerce on customer engagement, brand image, and hotel bookings among domestic tourists in Egypt. It also tests the possible mediation role of both customer engagement and hotel brand image in the indirect linkage between social commerce and booking intentions among prospect hotel guests. In doing so, this study contributes to theory by addressing some gaps in the knowledge and expanding our understanding of the mechanism of social commerce operation and its ramifications in the hotel industry. This study also contributes to the industry by providing some actionable suggestions that can inform hotel digital marketing strategies to effectively exploit social commerce in achieving marketing gains such as robust brand image and profound customer engagement.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Stimuli–Organism–Response (SOR) Theory

SOR theory provides a conceptual framework that interprets the behaviors of users [21]. The theory postulates that incentives of the external environment can stimulate the internal psychology of an organism or individual user which sequentially triggers certain behavioral responses [21,22]. In other words, when an individual becomes exposed to an

external stimulus or motivation, it evokes a subsequent psychological condition that in turn causes certain reactions or responses to that stimulus. SOR is considered a main theoretical framework that is widely adopted in the field of user behavior studies [46,47]. Examples of using SOR theory in individual behavior research included e-commerce [48] and online shopping [49]. However, Huang [47] disputed that the successful application of SOR theory in understanding the complexity of human behavior has been well established.

In this context, some previous studies have adopted the SOR model to examine social commerce. For example, Hossain et al. [50] used SOR to examine the impact of interpersonal interactions between customers in social commerce on customer relationship management. Similarly, Ming et al. [51] adopted SOR theory to examine the impulse-buying behavior in the social commerce context. Hewei and Youngsook [52] also applied SOR theory to investigate factors that influence the continuous purchase intentions in social commerce. Likewise, Leong et al. [5] employed SOR theory to develop a social commerce framework involving technological, social, commercial, and behavioral dimensions. More importantly, Asyraf et al. [53] conducted a systematic review of SOR in hospitality research and reported that it is one of the widely adopted theories in studies of hotel and restaurant operations. In fact, they advised future studies to employ SOR theory in investigating some suggested issues that focus on technology applications and devices as external stimuli that influence individuals' (organism) perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (response). Accordingly, this study investigates the potential influence of social commerce on booking intentions from the lens of SOR. That is, we postulate that the use of social commerce techniques by hotels (e.g., forum, communities, referrals, ratings, etc.) acts as a stimulus that induces users' internal psychological mechanisms to process these stimuli in the form of brand image perception and customer engagement (i.e., organism). This internal psychological processing inherent in forming a hotels' brand image and engaging with this brand will result in certain reactions or responses, primarily behavioral intentions to booking.

2.2. Social Commerce

Social commerce is the process of utilizing social media platforms for commercial purposes and business transactions. It is the amalgamation of social media websites and e-commerce functions [7,23]. That is, social commerce uses key features of social media platforms to enhance interactions with users/customers, streamline online business transactions, and stimulate demand and sales. In other words, social commerce goes beyond the traditional paradigm of e-commerce by creating a seamless online shopping environment using social media capabilities to conceal the transactional interaction in social engagement [23,54,55]. In the context of the hotel industry, social commerce capitalizes on the engaging features and interactive capabilities of social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, as well as hotel review/booking websites such as Booking.com, Trivago, and Tripadvisor to dynamically engage with guests, promote hotel brand, personalize or customize service offerings, facilitate transactions, encourage bookings, and enhance guest overall experience [13–15].

According to Hajli [55], the concept of social commerce involves three major dimensions: (1) recommendations and referrals, (2) forum and communities, and (3) review and ratings. These dimensions are the key factors that could have a potential impact on customers' buying decision-making process and sway their purchasing decisions [8,27], as discussed in the subsequent paragraphs.

Recommendations and referrals are key components of social commerce. This involves the process or activity by which users of social media platforms share their feedback and post-purchase satisfaction regarding products and services with their peers, friends, and family. Such activities can influence the buying decisions of others who were exposed to these comments and referrals, particularly authentic and trustworthy personal recommendations [55]. Endorsing a product or service within social groups or circles

through social media posts, shares, positive comments, or recommendations imposes some sort of credibility and social validity that resonate with potential buyers or interested customers [55,56]. Additionally, business organizations often encourage recommendations and referrals by offering rewards or discounts to satisfied customers to endorse products and services or even become brand advocates or ambassadors in their social networks. This form of transactional relationship enables users to share their positive experiences and create a circle of engagement while businesses gain widespread reach/visibility and the brand advocacy of social media users and influencers [55,56].

Forums and communities are another key component of social commerce that encompasses online websites that allow users to share information about a product/service or a brand, exchange insights, and engage in online discussions. Such platforms act as virtual communities or online gatherings where users with similar interests or needs/desires can discuss their opinions, provide advice, or offer recommendations [57,58]. Forums and communities assume an essential role in social commerce by enabling product/service discovery, providing post-use evaluations, and encouraging or discouraging buying decisions. Specifically, users can post inquiries, seek reviews, or engage with other users to discuss certain products or service before the actual purchase of the product/service. More importantly, forums and communities amplify confidence among interested individuals by depending on collective experience and first-hand knowledge about the product [55,58].

Reviews and ratings represent the third key aspect of social commerce and include users sharing feedback and post-use appraisal of products and services on social media platforms. This component of social commerce is particularly important as it enables customers to make informed decisions based on the reviews or feedback provided by peers who already have used the product or service [55,59,60]. Through this function of social commerce, customers have the chance to capitalize on the thorough reviews, ratings, and overall satisfaction provided by peers to form an opinion about the product and its key features such as quality, value, usability, and sustainability [55,59,60]. A recent study by Chakraborty and Biswal [16] indicated that potential customers tend to refer to online reviews and ratings prior to making a purchase decision.

Adopting social commerce, by employing its various dynamics and techniques, can effectively influence several sustainable marketing outcomes such as a strong and acknowledged brand image, sustainable customer engagement, and elevated hotel booking tendencies. When using social media platforms for marketing and sales purposes, hotels can amplify brand awareness and boost brand image by sharing original content that engages customers and by highlighting distinguishing features or unique experiences. Doing so helps establish business authenticity and transparency, leading customers to form a positive impression and perception of the hotel's brand [14,15,61]. The features of the social media platforms, like the users' contribution and online word of mouth, can help hotels build and maintain a favorable brand image [15,61]. Web 2.0 applications and platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or even review sites such as Trivago and Tripadvisor are engaging and interactive media through which hotels can create a long-lasting brand image and effectively communicate their distinguishing characteristics and attributes, as well as engage with customers on a more regular and comprehensive basis [30]. Similarly, customer engagement is a means of deep interactions with the guests and may be another implication for adopting social commerce strategies in the hospitality industry. The features of social commerce platforms, such as two-way real-time communication with consumers, allow hotel brands to foster good relationships with their guests that go beyond the traditional business transactional level [30,62]. In this regard, hotels can effectively leverage website elements such as impressive contents and targeted promotion messages as a way of fostering long-term communication channels that lead to better guest connections [63,64]. In the same way, encouraging booking intentions and behavior are the ultimate objectives of hotel marketing and promotional campaigns. In this area, social commerce platforms play significant roles via features that promote hotel bookings

such as referrals, recommendation, and call-to-action options, promoting direct bookings and hence occupancy and revenues [30,64].

In this regard, studies showed that engaged customers can boost business performance by promoting sales, referrals, and consumer loyalty [65,66]. Accordingly, many businesses strived to stimulate customers' engagement with their products or brands through social commerce techniques [67]. Social commerce proliferates user-generated content, improving customer interaction and engagement inside social networks [28]. Social commerce platforms allow hotels to respond promptly to guest inquiries, address concerns, and provide tailored offers that meet guests' specific needs/desires. Such practices enable seamless direct interactions between hotels and guests, whereby a deeper connection and effective engagement is formulated [13]. Here, Kang et al. [68] found that social commerce platforms' responsiveness and personalization positively impact patron relation strength, in turn boosting customer engagement, and Molinillo et al. [69] indicated that social commerce website attributes, e.g., information/service quality, also increase customer engagement. Furthermore, social commerce leverages social media to empower tourists and customers anywhere to interact online and co-validate business offers from social commerce groups [70]. Social commerce utilizes the convincing power of social proof and peer effect to drive booking intentions and stimulate purchasing behaviors among potential guests. Social media features like positive reviews, high ratings, favorable user-generated content, recommendations, and referrals are fundamental influences on customer buying decisions and increasing the likelihood of hotel bookings [16,55]. According to the results of Chen and Xie's [59] study, third-party reviews significantly influence customer purchase decisions. Similarly, Senecal and Nantel [56] found that online recommendations highly affect the online selection of products. Also, Ridings and Gefen's [71] study findings indicated that individuals' expectations of members in any online community, with knowledge and information exchange, are the primary motivation for entering virtual communities, and this has a significant effect on customer purchasing decisions.

Based on the above discussed literature, this study sets the following hypotheses for examination:

H1. *Hotel adoption of social commerce has a positive influence on hotel perceived brand image.*

H2. *Hotel adoption of social commerce has a positive influence on customer engagement.*

H3. *Hotel adoption of social commerce has a positive influence on hotel booking intentions.*

2.3. Hotel Perceived Brand Image

Brand image is a broad construct that refers to the ideas, impressions, sentiments, or attitudes that a customer may possess regarding a product, service, or brand [72–74]. Brand image, in most cases, is submerged into two significant factors, the hedonic and functional dimensions [75]. The hedonic aspect focuses on the emotional and the sensory aspect attached to the brand. This consists of customers' emotive response to product consumption or the use of a particular service and refers to the totality of customers' attitudes towards a brand [75,76]. On the other hand, the functional aspect is predominantly concerned with the utilitarian value or purpose of the product or service to be used by evaluating aspects like convenience, productivity, and standard [76].

Brand image plays a key role that can impact buyers' decision-making process. In this context, a positively perceived sustainable brand image is frequently linked to several marketing results such as customer preference, brand loyalty, and trust [77,78]. In a similar vein, brand image has the potential to impact several marketing outcomes in the hotel setting. For instance, a strong brand image enhances the competitive position of a hotel and reassures its guests about the quality standards, service reliability, and overall pleasant experience. This is particularly important in the hotel industry, whereby provided

services are predominantly intangible and a hotel's reputation and brand trust can change booking decisions [61]. An intricate hotel brand image that resonates with potential guests helps the hotel to attract more guests and build stronger and deeper connections with guests that exceed the usual transactions. It is about delivering a memorable accommodation experience that guests can remember for a long time [15]. More importantly, the prevalent dependence of current customers on social media and online reviews in addition to the excess availability of choices forces hotels to develop and maintain a robust brand image to capture guest attention and sway their brand choices [13–15].

Accordingly, it is safe to assume that a hotel brand image can influence the booking intentions of potential guests by determining their perception of a hotels' utilitarian and hedonic value. A hotel brand image that reflects features such as a reliable, luxurious, and distinguished accommodation experience will inspire guests' confidence, reassurance, and thereby tendency to booking. This is because guests are more likely to choose brands that they perceive to be of value and will satisfy their desires and expectations [16]. On the other hand, a negatively perceived hotel brand image erodes potential guests' trust and drives them away. In the social commerce context, the Internet's quick development and the rise of social media have revolutionized the travel and tourism sector [79]. Travelers are increasingly using user-generated content accessible on the Internet to research the tourist spots they want to see. These platforms also allow travelers to plan their holidays, including reserving hotels, flights, and other accommodations, by reading online reviews and ratings of travel and tourism services [80]. Tripadvisor.com, for example, provides reviews, ratings, photos, and forums on all travel services and recorded more than 884 million travel reviews in 2021 [81]. Consumers depend highly on these platforms for their purchases, and the three dimensions of social commerce, i.e., recommendations and referrals, forums and communities, and reviews and ratings, are considerably trusted references of information after advice from friends [81]. Studies indicated that social commerce could draw the customer's perceived brand image and, in turn, influence their purchasing intentions, e.g., reserving hotel rooms [82]. Accordingly, this study argues the following hypotheses:

H4. *A hotels' perceived brand image significantly impacts hotel booking intentions among potential guests.*

H5. *A hotels' perceived brand image has a significant mediation role in the linkage between social commerce and booking intentions.*

2.4. Customer Engagement in Hotel Settings

Customer engagement is the profound and meaningful interaction between a hotel and its guests that goes beyond ordinary customer–business relationships, aspiring to build a long-lasting deep connection and memorable encounters [30,62,83]. Put differently, customer engagement involves providing exceptional services by embracing guests' feedback, predicting their preferences/needs/desires, and customizing or personalizing interactions [30]. Academic-wise, the concept of customer engagement has been investigated from various perspectives. Previous studies (such as [15,30,83]) have predominantly considered customer engagement a multidimensional construct including cognitive aspects (e.g., absorption, enthusiasm, and attentions), emotional aspects (such as identification), and behavioral intentions (i.e., interaction).

In the setting of the hotel industry, customer engagement is a key element in developing sustainable relationships with guests and turning them into repeat guests or even brand ambassadors. This is because engaged hotel guests are more likely to revisit a hotel as well as to recommend it to friends and family members [84]. To that end, hotels ought to show serious commitment toward building meaningful and continuous relationship with guests through prompt responses to guests' inquiries, swift resolution of concerns, dissemination of tailored communication, and providing customized offerings and

loyalty initiatives. In doing so, hotels can gain guests' compassion and devotion and influence their brand choices and booking intentions [64,85].

When effectively managed, customer engagement can be a lever for some satisfactory results such as customer buying behaviors and loyalty. In fact, the essence of the customer engagement process is creating a strong emotional and cognitive bond between the hotel and its guests. Such a bond or attachment can favorably sway guests' buying decisions and booking intentions [64]. In other words, actively engaged hotel guests are inclined to perceive that hotel positively and therefore make that hotel their primary choice and preferred option over its competitors. In addition, some customer engagement tactics, namely personalized accommodation offerings and experiences, help create a memorable stay experience that stimulates guests' intentions to revisit or even recommend the hotel to others. Thus, it can be expected that utilizing customer engagement in hotel marketing results in high booking conversion rates [85]. Therefore, the following hypotheses are set for examination:

H6. *Customer engagement significantly impacts hotel booking intentions among potential guests.*

H7. *Customer engagement has a significant mediation role in the linkage between social commerce and booking intentions.*

2.5. Booking Intentions

Influencing customer intentions and buying behaviors are the ultimate goals of hotel marketing activities as they represent a primary determinant of actual booking and thereby generating revenue streams [86]. Booking intentions usually involve guest's emotional and cognitive evaluation of the hotel brand based on various cues, including online reviews, perception of the hotel brand, and expected value of the accommodation experience. The present study examines how hotel booking intention or buying decisions can be influenced by various dynamics or tactics of social commerce. Prior research indicated that embracing social commerce can boost hotel reservations. For example, the study by Chakraborty and Biswal [16] reported that positive online reviews have enhanced hotels' brand images and increased online hotel reservations.

In light of the literature and hypotheses discussed in the above sections, a conceptual model of this study was developed and is graphically presented in Figure 1.

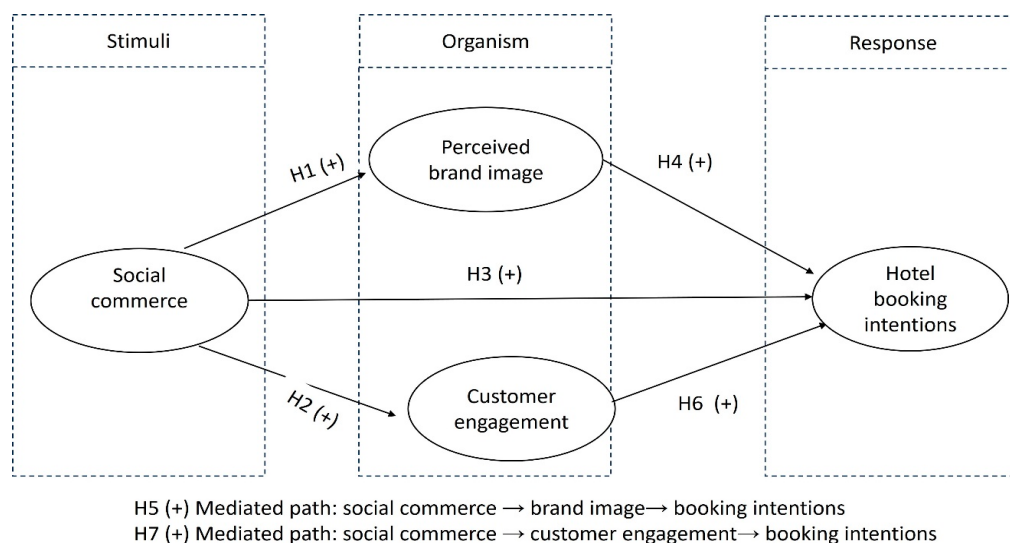


Figure 1. A conceptual model of this study.

3. Methods

3.1. Instrument

This study used a survey instrument comprising six sections to assess the examined variables. The first part of the survey explained to the participants the need for the survey, the rights to anonymity, and the option of confidentiality. The following section included basic demographic data of the participants such as age, gender, and marital status. Measures of social commerce employed by the hotel industry was the focus of the third part. Section 4 was dedicated to measuring the perceived brand image variable, and Section 5 aimed to measure the customer engagement construct. Lastly, Section 6 contained measures on booking intentions.

The measures of the variables in this study were adopted from prior research. Social commerce was operationalized by employing a three-dimensional scale with 15 items derived from Hajli's study [55]. The brand image was measured by six indicators derived from the works of Bruhn et al. [75] and Chakraborty and Biswal [16], while customer engagement was operationalized using 10 items from the study by Hollebeek et al. [87], and lastly, booking intentions were measured using three statements from multiple previous studies [88,89]. All scale items were operationalized on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree".

3.2. Participants and Procedures

Considering the accessibility and resources related to collecting primary data, a convenience sampling technique was employed to recruit the study participants and collect the data from the study's target population. The study population consists of Egyptian domestic visitors. The research team, comprising professors from the Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, leveraged their extensive network of connections with hotel managers across Egypt. To facilitate data collection, they designed a research questionnaire using Google Forms. The QR code for the questionnaire was then distributed to hotel managers to reach and gather responses from domestic visitors. The data were collected from January to April 2024. A total of 315 out of 600 questionnaires were gathered, with a response rate of 52.5%. Consequently, the returned surveys were verified to ensure completeness and genuineness before being subjected to analysis. In accordance with Hair et al. [90], this sample size is deemed adequate for inspection of the research model with Smart-PLS software v4, surpassing the recommended minimum sample size (ten times the number of arrows directed towards a latent construct), with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$. Also, according to various previous studies [91–93], PLS-SEM is a robust technique that does not require a large sample size or normally distributed data. Moreover, Dash and Paul [94] compared the CB-SEM and PLS-SEM methods for research in social sciences and implied the adequacy of using the convenience sampling technique. Hence, the size and sample technique adopted in this study was deemed appropriate. The demographic characteristics of the study participants are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of participants.

Gender	Freq.	%
Male	211	67%
Female	104	33%
Total	315	100
Marital status	Freq.	%
Single	52	16.5%
Married	151	48%
Others (engaged, widowed, etc.)	112	35.5%
Total	315	100
Age group	Freq.	%

Less than 20 years	86	27%
Between 20 and less than 40	149	47%
Between 40 and less than 60	59	19%
60 years or more	21	7%
Total	315	100

3.3. Data Analysis

The present study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using Smart-PLS 3.0 to examine the proposed hypotheses. Following the analytical protocol delineated by Hair et al. [90] for PLS-SEM, both the measurement and structural models underwent evaluation. The measurement model was examined to ascertain the common method bias and establish reliability and construct validity, utilizing various statistical metrics such as Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted, and heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations. Conversely, the structural model underwent an assessment examining the beta coefficients, t-statistics, and *p*-values. Further details of the statistical analysis are presented in the Results section.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample

The sample of this study encompassed different demographic groups drawn from the target population (Table 1). Particularly, both genders were represented, with a majority (67%) of male participants compared to females (33%). Regarding marital status, the largest proportion of participants (48%) reported being married, followed by the “others” category at 35.5%, which includes participants who are engaged, widowed, or any other status; only 16.5% of participants identified as single. Among all age groups, the youth demographic, comprising individuals aged 20 to 39 years old, constituted the largest segment at 47%, followed by the younger group (under 20 years old) at 27%. Adults aged 40 to 59 years old ranked third, comprising 19% of the sample, while senior citizens constituted the smallest proportion, accounting for 7%.

4.2. Measurement Model

Reliability and Construct Validity

The reliability of the measurement scales was confirmed by examining various statistics (Table 2). The values of Cronbach's alpha ($0.801 \leq \alpha \leq 0.981$), Rho A ($0.723 \leq \rho_A \leq 0.927$), and composite reliability (CR) ($0.865 \leq CR \leq 0.973$) significantly passed the threshold of 0.70, which ensured internal consistency of all scales. Likewise, the convergent validity was established, where the outer loadings of all indicators were significant and surpassed the threshold of 0.7 ($0.724 \leq \lambda \leq 0.988$; $13.70 \leq t \leq 38.21$). Similarly, the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded the value of 0.5 ($0.825 \leq AVE \leq 0.967$) indicating that the study measures converge toward validation.

Table 2. Reliability and construct validity.

Constructs	VIF	Loadings	t-Value
A. Social commerce ($\alpha = 0.938$; Rho A = 0.927; CR = 0.973; AVE = 0.873)			
1. Recommendations and referrals			
I feel my friends' recommendations are generally frank	2.76	0.827	29.32 *
I feel my friends' recommendations are generally reliable	1.56	0.834	32.25 *
Overall, my friends' recommendations are trustworthy	2.15	0.827	19.14 *
I trust my friends on SNS and share my status and pictures with them	2.93	0.915	45.39 *
2. Forums and communities			

I feel my friends on forums and communities are generally frank	1.87	0.816	38.21 *
I feel my friends on forums and communities are reliable	2.56	0.873	32.14 *
Overall, my friends on forums and communities are trustworthy	2.26	0.857	27.19 *
I trust my friends on forums and communities and share my status and pictures with them	1.57	0.814	47.70 *
3. Ratings and reviews			
I feel my friends' rating and reviews are generally frank	2.89	0.745	13.70 *
I feel my friends' rating and reviews are reliable	1.71	0.988	32.07 *
Overall, my friends' rating and reviews are trustworthy	2.67	0.825	29.69 *
I trust my friends on rating and reviews and share my status and pictures with them	2.37	0.819	37.44 *
B. Customer engagement (R2 = 0.312; Q2 = 0.139) (α = 0.801; Rho A = 0.827; CR = 0.879; AVE = 0.865)			
1. Cognitive processing			
Using this hotel gets me to think about it	2.39	0.835	15.96 *
I think about this hotel a lot when I'm using it	1.57	0.822	27.37 *
Using this hotel stimulates my interest to learn more about the brand	2.43	0.732	37.79 *
2. Affection			
I feel very positive when I use this hotel	2.94	0.873	22.71 *
Using this hotel makes me happy	2.78	0.727	35.81 *
I feel good when I use this hotel	2.17	0.823	17.51 *
I'm proud to use this hotel	1.40	0.924	28.51 *
3. Activation			
I spend a lot of time using this hotel compared to other hotel brands	1.86	0.767	36.29 *
Whenever I'm staying in a hotel, I usually stay in this hotel	2.54	0.875	29.85 *
This hotel is one of the hotel brands I usually stay in when I stay in a hotel	2.16	0.708	39.55 *
C. Brand Image (R2 = 0.709; Q2 = 0.236) (α = 0.845; Rho A = 0.723; CR = 0.968; AVE = 0.825)			
1. Functional Brand Image			
Online reviews on hotels describe the hotel's performance	1.86	0.831	36.54 *
Online reviews on hotels describe the hotel's efficiency	1.82	0.724	20.42 *
Online reviews on hotels describe the hotel's competence	2.56	0.776	16.88 *
2. Hedonic Brand Image			
Online reviews make the hotel brand attractive toward consumers	2.36	0.886	29.94 *
Online reviews make the hotel brand charming toward consumers	1.52	0.814	33.50 *
Online reviews make the hotel brand fascinating toward consumers	1.38	0.903	19.73 *
D. Booking Intentions (R2 = 0.709; Q2 = 0.236) (α = 0.981; Rho A = 0.857; CR = 0.865; AVE = 0.967)			
Online reviews help me to decide which hotel I am likely to book	1.96	0.867	14.53 *
Online reviews help me to decide in which hotel I would like to stay	2.46	0.855	37.22 *
Online reviews guide me in considering which hotel I am likely to visit	2.75	0.979	15.94 *

* $p < 0.001$.

Furthermore, discriminant validity was also established by inspecting the recommended statistics (Table 3). Specifically, the correspondent square roots of AVE were significantly higher than the correlation coefficients [95]. Additionally, there was no heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio greater than the threshold of 0.90, as advised by [96].

Table 3. Discriminant validity of the constructs.

Constructs	A	B	C	D
A. Social commerce	0.863	0.519	0.473	0.635
B. Customer engagement	0.598	0.692	0.631	0.573
C. Brand image	0.572	0.475	0.642	0.491
D. Booking intentions	0.453	0.523	0.415	0.681

The values of the square root of AVE are bolded.

4.3. Structural Model

The results, as shown in Table 4, revealed that social commerce has positively and significantly influenced the intended outcomes, including perceived brand image ($\beta = 0.791$; $t = 23.35$), customer engagement ($\beta = 0.736$; $t = 25.73$), and booking intentions ($\beta = 0.357$; $t = 3.44$). These results provide support for hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. The effect of perceived brand image on booking intentions was positive ($\beta = 0.637$) and significant ($t = 13.19$). Likewise, the impact of customer engagement on booking intentions was also positive ($\beta = 0.358$) and significant ($t = 12.92$). Consequently, both hypotheses 4 and 6 are supported. In light of Cohen's [97] recommendations regarding effect size using the F square test, the results showed that all independent variables have a reasonable effect size on their intended dependent variables ($1.17 \leq F^2 \leq 1.93$).

Table 4. Coefficients and significances of direct paths.

H#	Paths	β	t-Value	F2	Decision
H1	Social commerce $\rightarrow$ perceived brand image	0.791	23.35 *	1.46	Supported
H2	Social commerce $\rightarrow$ customer engagement	0.736	25.73 *	1.93	Supported
H3	Social commerce $\rightarrow$ booking intentions	0.357	3.44 **	1.33	Supported
H4	Perceived brand image $\rightarrow$ booking intentions	0.637	13.19 **	1.17	Supported
H6	Customer engagement $\rightarrow$ booking intentions	0.358	12.92 *	1.81	Supported

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.005$.

A mediation analysis was performed to examine the mediation effects of both brand image and customer engagement in the association between social commerce and hotel booking intentions (Table 5). The findings showed that brand image significantly mediated the linkage between social commerce and hotel booking (effect = 0.427; $t = 7.39$). In the same vein, customer engagement also significantly mediates the relationship between social commerce and hotel booking intentions (effect = 0.356; $t = 6.59$). Hence, hypotheses 5 and 7 are accepted.

Table 5. Coefficients and significances of mediated paths.

H#	Paths	Effect	t-Value	Decision
H5	Social commerce $\rightarrow$ brand image $\rightarrow$ booking intentions	0.427	7.39 **	Supported
H7	Social commerce $\rightarrow$ customer engagement $\rightarrow$ booking intentions	0.356	6.59 *	Supported

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.005$.

5. Discussion and Theoretical Contribution

Social commerce has become a significant factor in shaping customer behavior in the hospitality sector. It facilitates meaningful and dual connections between hotels and potential visitors by offering individualized recommendations, real-time feedback, dynamics content, and ease of use of the reservation method via social media networks. By the interaction between social commerce dynamics and sustainability, hotel managers can not only improve the hotel brand image, engagement of customers, and booking intentions but also positively influence the hotel environment. This holistic attitude confirms that

sustainability becomes a fundamental part of the hotel's identity and process, fulfilling the increasing demand for accountable and sustainable tourism. Hence, it likely influences the hotel's image, customer engagement, and booking intentions [13,14]. As a result, hoteliers tend to utilize social media networks to develop an interactive communication channel that attracts and engages customers and generates a strong brand image that resonates with their target visitors. Therefore, social commerce capabilities can favorably influence the perception of hotel image, boost customer engagement, and encourage booking intentions and behaviors [14,15].

The outcomes of this paper provided some empirical evidence on the key role that social commerce can play in hotel marketing operations during this era of digital revolution. The results showed the positive impacts of social commerce on the way possible hotel visitors perceive its image in addition to offering a means for improving customer engagement with hotel brand via online social networks, which eventually help stimulate booking intentions and behaviors among the hotel guests. These conclusions are consistent with precedent studies [30,64,85]. The results also highlighted the critical role of both brand image and customer engagement as mediators in the relationship between social commerce and hotel booking intentions. That is, social commerce techniques, including "recommendations and referrals", "forums and communities", and "rating and reviews" are effective tools for enhancing hotel brand image and keeping customers engaged and associated with the hotel brand, which in turn encourage guests to book rooms in the hotel they are engaged with.

Despite the importance of social commerce in the hotel industry and the numerous studies that examined it, this study adds to the literature of hospitality management by addressing a knowledge gap raised by prior research [18,29,30,64] and responding to the call of several academics [2,31,32] to further investigate social commerce and its outcomes in the context of the service industry. Social commerce is a relatively recent concept that is still in the early adoption stage [2,30–32], and it is characterized by being dynamic and complex [18,98], soliciting continuous and updated investigations of its changing dynamics. Furthermore, previous studies in the area of technological advancement and application in the hotel industry were mainly focused on Western cultures and lacked Eastern or developing countries [34,85]. Likewise, despite the economic importance and the steady growth of domestic tourism globally and domestically [36,37], prior studies disregarded investigating domestic tourists' perspective of social commerce and its impact on their perception of hotel brands, engagement with hotel brand, and hotel booking intentions. Therefore, this study, by incorporating a sample of domestic tourists in Egypt, attempts to bridge these gaps and add to the relatively recent literature related to social commerce in the field of hospitality and tourism.

More importantly, the current study extends the applications of Stimuli–Organism–Response (SOR) theory to user behavior in social commerce applications in the hotel industry. The SOR model explains how an external motive or stimulus can affect the internal psychological state of an individual (organism), triggering a specific response toward those stimuli in the form of behavior [21,22]. It has been notably adopted in customer behavior and social commerce research [19,20,23,24]. Accordingly, the SOR model was employed to explain the influence of social commerce dynamics (stimuli) on a hotel's perceived image and customer engagement with the hotel brand (organism), resulting in a favorable behavioral intention (response) toward the hotel. The findings of this research concur with the SOR model and indicate that social commerce, through its various techniques such as forums and referrals, can be utilized as stimuli that evoke the internal psychological processing of hotels' potential guests by forming their perception of a hotels' brand image and promoting engagement with that brand, which eventually impact guests' responses toward that brand in the form of an increased tendency to hotel bookings. Such a result can inform hotel marketing strategies and shed light on new aspects for considering social commerce applications in the hotel industry.

6. Practical and Managerial Implications

Based on the empirical findings, this study presents some practical implications for hotel managers. Hotel managers can improve their brand image on social commerce networks by generating or sponsoring visually attractive content that can directly speak to their potential audience. This can be achieved by employing superior photography and videos that promote the hotel's unique features and facilities on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, and booking networks. Stimulating user-generated content with contests and branded hashtags improves the hotel's appeal, further advancing engagement and authenticity. By repeatedly presenting visually appealing material and stimulating guest collaboration, hotels may carve out a convincing niche for themselves in the competitive hospitality business.

Hotels can significantly improve customer encounters by effectively utilizing social commerce techniques and methods. First, hotels are encouraged to actively interact with their followers (i.e., potential visitors) on social network sites by instantly responding to their inquiries, reviews, and observations, which consequently creates a bond and promotes loyalty. Also, hotels can integrate interactive approaches such as polls and live streams as well as host virtual mega events, webinars, or Q&A workshops. Doing so can inspire active participation and dialogue with the potential audience, deliver valuable insights, showcase expertise, create memorable experiences for their forthcoming audience, deepen customer engagement with the hotel brand, and develop solid relationships with visitors. Hotel managers and marketing directors are strongly advised to incorporate booking functionalities immediately into social media networks, such as Instagram Shopping or Facebook Marketplace, to simplify the booking process. Lastly, it is worth recommending that hotels customize service offerings and promotional offers based on customers' preferences and browsing behavior to motivate booking intentions among potential visitors.

As for customers, this study recommends that customers need to engage in social commerce and convey the experiences they have had in various hospitality places using (1) recommendations and referrals, (2) forums and communities, and (3) reviews and ratings to provide information to others. Customers can also benefit from other customers' information, communicate directly with service providers, ask questions, and obtain direct answers for use in decision-making to fully benefit from the experience they intend to have. Outbound tourism can be attracted through the interaction of domestic tourists on social commerce. Given that the tourist experience is conveyed by the country's residents themselves, it is inevitable that the experience will be detailed and helpful.

7. Conclusions

Drawing on Stimuli–Organism–Response (SOR) theory, this study seeks to examine the impact of social commerce on hotel booking intentions, both directly and indirectly, by considering the mediating effects of both brand image and customer engagement. The primary data were collected from 315 local Egyptian tourists during the period from January to April 2024 by an online survey, and by using the PLS-SEM approach, the intended relationships were examined. The results demonstrated the significant and positive effect of social commerce on both hotel brand image and customer engagement, which in turn motivated booking intentions among likely domestic guests. The results also sustained the significant mediating influence of hotel brand image and customer engagement on the connection between social commerce and hotel booking intentions. This study offers some practical implications for industry managers that support their social commerce techniques and boost booking intentions and behavior among domestic tourists.

8. Limitations and Further Research

This study has some limitations. First, this empirical investigation is limited to the Egyptian context, which may not completely portray the diverse changing aspects of

social commerce in other different regions. Social, economic, and cultural differences may affect the generalizability of the study results to other nations. Also, this study used a cross-sectional approach, which might limit the capability to draw a causal inference. Therefore, further longitudinal studies are advised to better recognize the changing outcomes of social commerce over a long time. Furthermore, future studies can adopt a comparative approach and investigate social commerce in different cultures and countries to expand our understanding of the dynamic interrelationships between social commerce, hotel brand image, customer engagement, and booking intentions. Finally, some moderating variables, such as participant demographics, can be investigated to examine their effects on the tested relationships.

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