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Social commerce: Analysing the integration of e-commerce and social media platforms for direct selling and customer acquisition

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Abstract

This research aimed to analyse the integration of e-commerce and social media platforms for direct selling and customer acquisition. Seven hypotheses were formed to achieve the aim. For this purpose, a survey of 412 social commerce customers and interviews with 24 different types of stakeholders were conducted. The findings supported all seven hypotheses explaining 68% of the variance in customer acquisition effectiveness, 59% in purchasing intentions, 54% in customer engagement, and 37% in trust. Seller responsiveness and secure payment options were the strongest predictors of trust. Customer acquisition was most efficient with influencer partnerships, followed by user-generated content campaigns and live shopping events. While cash on delivery was most preferred, the Mada card is gaining popularity. All these findings were supported by the literature. Thematic analysis of interview responses revealed six themes. They include cultural dimensions of trust building, seamless integration as a competitive advantage, personalisation through social engagement, challenges of platform dependency, regulatory and payment infrastructure gaps, and the evolving role of micro-influencers. These themes were supported by the literature.

Keywords: Social commerce, e-commerce, social media, direct selling, customer acquisition.

Introduction

Social commerce merges e-commerce with social media, creating seamless in-app shopping, leveraging user-generated content (UGC), peer reviews, and influencer marketing for direct selling, enhanced customer engagement, and efficient customer acquisition, transforming browsing into buying by integrating discovery, interaction, and purchase within social platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, thereby shortening the path to purchase and fostering community trust. The mechanisms involved are in-application purchases, user-generated content and reviews, influencer and creator economy, and live shopping. For business, there are the

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benefits of direct selling to customers, enhanced customer engagement, targeted marketing, increased brand visibility, and insights from the data. For customers, social commerce shortens the buying path, creates space for community building through interactions with brands and other customers to build trust and loyalty.

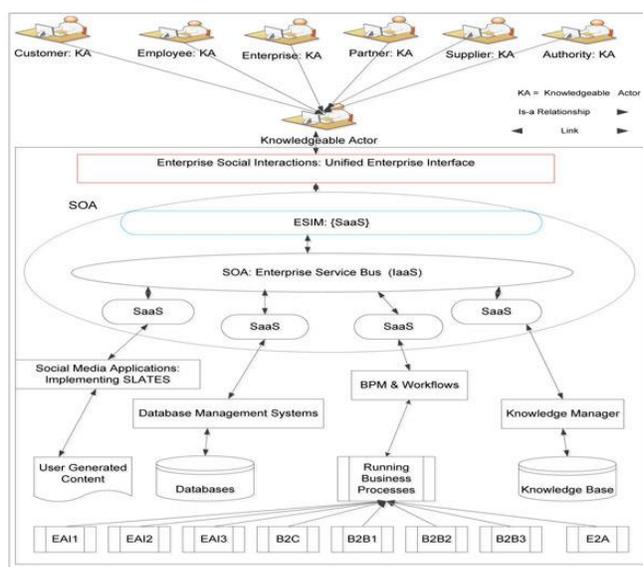
Turban, Bolloju, and Liang (2010) observed that social commerce is spreading rapidly around the globe, creating new and improved business models for conducting e-commerce as an integration of social media marketing and Web 2.0 and e-commerce. However, purely from a business perspective, social commerce is the delivery of e-commerce activities in social networks and by social software tools. Although there are benefits outlined above, there are problems related to conducting cost-benefit analysis and justification, security and privacy issues, possibilities of fraud, violation of intellectual property rights, legal risks, employees' resistance or reluctance, quality of content and biased content creation, and misuse and waste of time and resources.

According to Linda (2010), the concepts associated with social commerce are Web 2.0 technology, E-commerce, and online social media. Social commerce networks are sustainable because of the various incentives given to users as they collaborate with others, regardless of their identity and location.

Social commerce means doing commerce using social media in a collaborative and participative way. There is an enterprise interactive interface that enables social interactions. Social commerce is enabled by technologies like Web 2.0, Cloud Computing and Service Oriented Architecture (SOA). Baghdadi (2013) proposed a framework for social commerce, putting Enterprise Social Interactions as central entities to provide a strong business justification for social commerce design and adoption with these enabling technologies. The framework is given in Fig.1.

Figure 1

The framework proposed by Baghdadi (2013)



Aim and hypotheses

Aim

This research aimed to analyse the integration of e-commerce and social media platforms for direct selling and customer acquisition.

Hypotheses

1. Platform integration strengthens customer engagement and fosters purchase intentions.
2. Trust plays a critical role in enhancing purchase intentions.
3. Perceived ease of use positively influences purchase intentions.
4. Customer engagement drives customer acquisition.
5. Social influence contributes to stronger purchase intentions.
6. Content quality builds trust and deepens customer engagement.
7. Purchase intentions ultimately translate into customer acquisition.

Literature Review

This literature review will align with the above hypotheses.

Platform integration strengthens customer engagement and fosters purchase intentions

A two-step approach was used by Blasco-Arcas, Hernandez-Ortega, and Jimenez-Martinez (2016). Study 1 adopted an experimental approach to explore C2C interactions and personalisation-related cues. Study 2 focused on the importance of customer emotions to foster engagement and brand image, and also analysed their effect on purchase intentions. The authors found that during interactions on the platform, customer engagement with the firm influenced brand image. The pleasure and arousal experienced by customers influenced their engagement, while dominance modifies brand image. Customer engagement and brand image have a positive effect on purchase behaviour.

Sahoo, et al. (2025) undertook an exploratory sentiment analysis of Amazon reviews for green products to identify emotional responses, perceived value drivers, and behavioural cues. The authors found that personalisation and transparency enhanced trust and more favourable attitudes, while perceived risks covering greenwashing concerns, cost, and performance doubts were obstacles to adoption

Filipović and Šapić (2025) proposed a comprehensive model incorporating the variables, including AI elements (*recommendation systems, intelligent search, and chatbots*), social media consumer engagement, perceived ease of use, and perceived usefulness, based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) framework. The authors noted that consumer engagement was impacted by recommendation systems and chatbots, which, combined with

perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness, influenced purchase intention. Cosmopolitanism positively moderated the relationship between AI recommendation systems and consumer engagement.

From a survey of 417 Indian OTT consumers, Habib, Hamadneh, and Hassan (2022) observed that there was no direct effect of digital media marketing on the purchase intention of consumers for OTT platforms. An indirect effect through brand image and customer engagement showed that brand image and consumer engagement mediates the relationship between DMM practices and the purchase intention of OTT platforms.

Naeem (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews with customers and marketing teams in the banking sector and internet service providers. Social networking platforms played a significant role in fostering responsiveness, awareness, assurance, reliability, and empathy among users. At the same time, respondents expressed serious concerns about the privacy of personal and financial information, particularly within the banking sector. Official Facebook pages of service providers, local community Facebook groups (both open and closed), sponsored ads, promotional posts, WhatsApp groups, and YouTube video comments are frequently used to share service reviews. These exchanges among friends, extended networks, family members, and the wider public strongly influenced purchase decisions. Both customers and marketing teams stressed that local community Facebook groups have emerged as important spaces for enhancing service quality and shaping consumer choices.

Thus, the hypothesis is supported by the reviewed papers.

Trust plays a critical role in enhancing purchase intentions.

A survey of 200 Indian internet customers by Sahi, Sekhon, and Quareshi (2016) showed that trusting beliefs were negatively influenced by an uncertainty avoidance culture and positively influenced by a firm's image and a customer's price awareness. Purchase intentions (PIs) were boosted by trusting beliefs in an online environment.

Findings from a Pakistani survey by Rehman, Bhatti, Mohamed, and Ayoup (2019) showed that consumer purchase intention was influenced by perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Consumer purchase intention (CPI) mediated the relationship between all five independent constructs and online shopping behaviour (OSB). Commitment and trust moderated the relationship between consumer purchase intention and internet shopping behaviour, along with a direct influence on online shopping behaviour.

A literature review of 23 papers led Sulistyowati and Husda (2023) to identify recurring themes: reputation, risk, information quality, and utility, along with social support, subjective norms, fulfilment, trustworthiness, and vendor reliability. There is a critical role for trust in mitigating risk, mediating relationships, and predicting purchase intent, influenced by content quality and social presence. Thus, trust has a significant role in improving online purchase intentions.

A meta-analysis of 19 studies by Wang, Shahzad, Ahmad, Abdullah, and Hassan (2022) showed a positive association between trust, especially trust in sellers, and purchase intentions.

Consumers in forums and communities can be benefitted by higher levels of trust. No difference in types of websites in influencing trust was observed.

Results obtained by Hajli, Sims, Zadeh, and Richard (2017) from a survey among Facebook users showed that trust in social networking sites increased the information available to users of forums and communities, reviews, recommendations, ratings and referrals. These factors facilitated purchase intentions.

Enhancement of purchase intentions by trust was highlighted by the above-reviewed papers and thus supported the hypothesis.

Perceived ease of use positively influences purchase intentions.

A survey of 316 Taiwanese online customers by Moslehpour, Pham, Wong, and Bilgiçli (2018) showed that both perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use enhanced purchase intentions. Similar results were obtained by Primanda, Setyaning, Hidayat, and Ekasasi (2020) from a survey of 210 Indonesian online customers. In the studies of Zhang, Ahmad, Azman, and Mingxia (2023) both social influence and perceived usefulness exerted a direct influence on customers' purchase intentions. They also influenced customers' purchase intentions through trust in the platform. However, trust in the platform did not show any mediating effect. A survey of 400 Indonesian customers of mobile applications by Fachrulamry and Hendrayati (2021) showed that these customers perceived ease of use before buying mobile commerce applications because it is related to how consumers wish to use a system for convenience. A survey of 236 Indonesian e-commerce customers by Keni (2020) revealed that both perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use influenced consumers' intention to repurchase. Trust and customer satisfaction mediated these relationships. Trust was a stronger mediator than customer satisfaction.

The above-reviewed papers demonstrate that not only perceived ease of use, but also perceived usefulness, influences purchase intentions. Thus, there is strong evidence in support of this hypothesis.

Customer engagement drives customer acquisition.

Devakumar (2025) noted that customer acquisition can be increased in e-commerce using a strategic blend of trust, customer engagement, transparent data policies, and AI-driven experiences. A survey of 400 Indian e-commerce customers found that customer engagement had a significant impact on customer acquisition. However, AI-driven personalisation was a stronger driver of customer acquisition. A survey of 224 e-commerce customers by Hamid (2024) showed a positive correlation between customer engagement, customer acquisition, and purchase intention. Based on a review of the literature, Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) proposed a model of customer engagement (CE). The model proposed that the participation and involvement of current or potential customers serve as antecedents of CE. In a discussion paper, Marimuthu, Rizal, Basiruddin, and Abdul Salam (2023) showed that social media marketing to increase customer engagement will lead to increased customer acquisition. The authors used a case study of a graphic firm to illustrate the model.

Using a regression model analysis on live streaming data in the mature e-tail live streaming market environment, Zheng, Li, and Na (2022) showed that the specific indicators of customer engagement were not positively related to customer purchase intention and customer acquisition.

Thus, out of five papers, one was negative, and the others were positive about the hypothesis. This means there is some support for the hypothesis.

Social influence contributes to stronger purchase intentions.

In an empirical study, Liang, Hu, Islam, and Mubarik (2021) observed a positive effect of both informative and normative social influence on purchase intentions. Monetary benefits and environmental concerns strengthened this relationship. A survey of 396 Chinese e-commerce customers by Liang, Xu, and Huang (2024) showed that social influence and brand image influenced purchase intentions. From a survey of 338 Indonesian students using e-commerce Gunawan, Kenang, and Rahmania (2023) concluded that purchase intention was enhanced by social influence and peer influence. An experimental study by Lee, Shi, Cheung, Lim, and Sia (2011) showed a positive social influence, strengthened the relationship between beliefs about and attitude towards online shopping and the relationship between attitude and purchase intention. Thus, the effect is indirect in this study.

An analysis of Instagram exchanges by Teo, Leng, and Phua (2019) showed no effect of social influence on purchase intention. Methodological limitations could have led to this result.

Thus, except for one study, the rest supported the hypothesis. This means there is some support for the hypothesis.

Content quality builds trust and deepens customer engagement.

The results obtained by Sobouti and Alavijeh (2024) from a survey of 399 participants showed that the content of social media and digital marketing tools enhanced customer emotional engagement and trust. A review of the literature by Sofia (2024) showed that content marketing increased customer engagement via increased trust. This happened due to good content quality. A survey of 231 participants from the healthcare sector by Alzoubi, et al. (2025) showed that AI-mediated personalised marketing content enhanced trust and customer engagement. Validation of a framework by Khan (2023) using a survey of 191 participants showed that the credibility of online influencers increased customer engagement. Using a comprehensive review of the literature, Julaeha (2024) showed that information quality improved both customer engagement and trust. Other variables concerning content quality also enhanced trust and customer engagement. Informative, useful, relevant and high-quality content marketing determines customer engagement and loyalty (from trust).

Thus, there is overall support for the hypothesis.

Purchase intentions ultimately translate into customer acquisition.

The papers of Zheng, Li, and Na (2022) and Hamid (2024) provide partial support for this hypothesis. These papers have been discussed in relation to the hypothesis: customer engagement drives customer acquisition. From a study of 96 live-streaming users, Goetha and Manafe (2022) observed that Customer engagement in live streaming sessions can influence consumer purchase intentions as customer demand drives sellers to promote products. Thus, actively participating customers in live streaming promotional sessions are more satisfied and influence purchase intentions. Customer engagement activities are used for creating customer

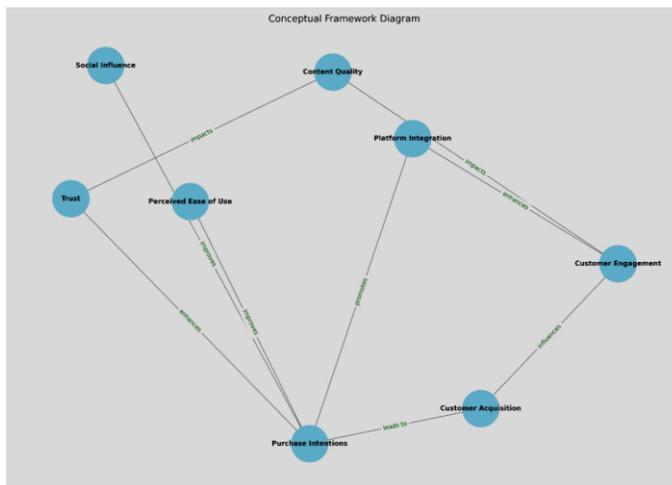
acquisition. The exact mechanism of purchase intentions enhancing customer acquisition is provided in this paper.

There are not many papers on purchase intentions enhancing customer acquisition. The evidence presented above supports the hypothesis.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework based on the above hypotheses, supported by literature, is presented below.

Figure 2



This framework maps out how various digital and psychological factors interact to influence customer engagement and purchase behaviour. It highlights a sequence of causal and reinforcing relationships among eight key constructs:

Key Insights

- Trust plays a dual role: it boosts both usability perceptions and purchase intentions.
- Platform Integration is a central node, enhancing engagement and promoting purchases.
- Customer Engagement acts as a bridge between platform experience and acquisition.
- Purchase Intentions are shaped by multiple upstream factors, including trust, ease of use, and acquisition.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods research design to explore how e-commerce and social media platforms are integrated for direct selling and customer acquisition in Saudi Arabia. The research

combined quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews to offer a thorough understanding of social commerce practices within the Saudi market context.

Research Context

Saudi Arabia was selected as the research context due to its rapidly growing digital economy, high social media penetration rate (approximately 79% of the population), and the government's Vision 2030 initiative promoting digital transformation. The Kingdom has witnessed significant growth in social commerce activities, particularly on platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok, which align with local cultural preferences and communication patterns.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify participants across three key stakeholder groups: (1) social commerce entrepreneurs and business owners, (2) consumers who have purchased products through social media platforms, and (3) digital marketing professionals working with social commerce brands in Saudi Arabia.

For the quantitative phase, a sample size of 385 participants was determined using Cochran's formula with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, based on Saudi Arabia's internet user population. The final sample consisted of 412 respondents to account for potential incomplete responses. For the qualitative phase, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved.

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Data Collection

An online self-administered questionnaire was distributed through multiple channels, including social media platforms, email lists, and Saudi e-commerce forums between March and June 2024. The questionnaire was developed in both Arabic and English to accommodate linguistic preferences and ensure cultural appropriateness. The instrument consisted of 48 items organised into five sections:

1. Demographic characteristics (7 items)
2. Social media usage patterns and platform preferences (9 items)
3. Social commerce purchasing behaviour (12 items)
4. Trust and security perceptions (10 items)
5. Customer acquisition and retention factors (10 items)

All measurement scales were adapted from validated instruments in existing literature and modified to suit the Saudi social commerce context. A five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was used for attitudinal and behavioural intention items. The

questionnaire was pre-tested with 30 participants and refined based on their feedback to ensure clarity and cultural relevance.

Qualitative Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 participants, including 10 social commerce business owners, 8 consumers, and 6 digital marketing professionals. Interviews were conducted in Arabic or English based on participant preference, either face-to-face in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam, or via video conferencing platforms. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and followed a flexible interview guide covering topics such as:

- Experiences with social commerce platforms
- Integration strategies between e-commerce and social media
- Customer acquisition and engagement tactics
- Challenges and opportunities in the Saudi market
- Trust-building mechanisms and payment preferences
- Cultural factors influencing social commerce adoption

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 28.0 and AMOS 26.0. The analysis proceeded in several stages:

1. **Preliminary Analysis:** Data screening was conducted to identify missing values, outliers, and assess normality assumptions. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables.
2. **Reliability and Validity Assessment:** Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed to assess internal consistency reliability. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to evaluate construct validity, including convergent and discriminant validity.
3. **Hypothesis Testing:** Structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed to test the proposed relationships between constructs. Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the predictors of customer acquisition effectiveness.
4. **Comparative Analysis:** Independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were conducted to examine differences across demographic groups and platform preferences.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. The process involved:

1. Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts

2. Generating initial codes systematically across the dataset
3. Searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes
4. Reviewing themes for coherence and distinctiveness
5. Defining and naming final themes
6. Producing the report with vivid examples

NVivo 14 software was used to facilitate coding and theme development. An inductive-deductive approach was adopted, allowing both theory-driven and data-driven codes to emerge. Inter-coder reliability was established by having two researchers independently code 25% of the transcripts, achieving a Cohen's kappa of 0.84.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board before data collection. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Data were stored securely in password-protected systems, and identifying information was removed from transcripts.

Validity and Reliability Measures

Several measures were implemented to enhance the validity and reliability of findings. For quantitative data, pilot testing, established scales, and statistical validation procedures ensured measurement quality. For qualitative data, credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants reviewed interview summaries for accuracy. Triangulation between quantitative and qualitative findings provided additional validation of results. The researcher maintained reflexive memos throughout the research process to acknowledge potential biases and ensure transparency.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Sample Characteristics

The final sample comprised 412 respondents who completed the online questionnaire. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. The majority of respondents were female (58.3%), aged between 25 and 34 years (43.2%), held bachelor's degrees (51.2%), and reported monthly household incomes between 10,000 and 20,000 SAR (35.4%). This demographic profile reflects the typical social commerce user base in Saudi Arabia, where younger, educated consumers demonstrate higher engagement with digital platforms.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N = 412)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	172	41.7%
	Female	240	58.3%
Age Group	18-24 years	89	21.6%
	25-34 years	178	43.2%
	35-44 years	102	24.8%
	45-54 years	32	7.8%
	55+ years	11	2.6%
Education Level	High school or below	45	10.9%
	Bachelor's degree	211	51.2%
	Master's degree	128	31.1%
	Doctoral degree	28	6.8%
Monthly Income (SAR)	Less than 5,000	67	16.3%
	5,000-10,000	98	23.8%
	10,000-20,000	146	35.4%
	20,000-30,000	68	16.5%
	Above 30,000	33	8.0%
City	Riyadh	152	36.9%
	Jeddah	128	31.1%
	Dammam	67	16.3%
	Other cities	65	15.7%

Social Media Platform Usage and Preferences

Respondents demonstrated high engagement with multiple social media platforms for social commerce activities. Table 2 illustrates the frequency of platform usage for shopping-related activities. Instagram emerged as the dominant platform (89.3% daily users), followed by Snapchat (76.2%) and X (formerly Twitter) (54.1%). TikTok showed rapidly growing adoption, with 48.5% of respondents using it daily for shopping discovery.

Table 2: Social Media Platform Usage Frequency for Shopping Activities

Platform	Daily	Several times per week	Once a week	Less than once a week	Never
Instagram	89.3%	7.2%	2.2%	0.7%	0.6%
Snapchat	76.2%	14.3%	5.8%	2.4%	1.3%

Platform	Daily	Several times per week	Once a week	Less than once a week	Never
X (Twitter)	54.1%	22.8%	12.1%	7.3%	3.7%
TikTok	48.5%	28.4%	13.6%	6.1%	3.4%
Facebook	31.8%	24.5%	18.9%	15.3%	9.5%
WhatsApp Business	67.5%	19.2%	8.0%	3.6%	1.7%

Social Commerce Purchasing Behaviour

Analysis of purchasing behaviour revealed that 94.7% of respondents had made at least one purchase through social media platforms in the past six months. Table 3 presents the product categories most frequently purchased through social commerce channels. Fashion and apparel dominated (78.4%), followed by beauty and cosmetics (68.9%) and electronics and accessories (52.4%).

Table 3: Product Categories Purchased Through Social Commerce (N = 390)

Product Category	Frequency	Percentage	Average Monthly Spending (SAR)
Fashion and Apparel	306	78.4%	847
Beauty and Cosmetics	269	68.9%	623
Electronics and Accessories	204	52.4%	1,234
Home Décor and Furniture	178	45.6%	1,456
Food and Beverages	167	42.8%	412
Health and Wellness Products	156	40.0%	534
Books and Educational Materials	98	25.1%	287
Handmade and Artisan Products	89	22.8%	398

Reliability and Validity Assessment

Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.82 to 0.91, indicating good internal consistency reliability. Table 4 presents the reliability statistics and confirmatory factor analysis results. Composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.83 to 0.92, and average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.58 to 0.74, all exceeding the minimum thresholds of 0.70 and 0.50, respectively, confirming convergent validity.

Table 4: Reliability and Validity Statistics

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE	Factor Loadings Range
Platform Integration	6	0.87	0.88	0.61	0.72-0.84
Trust in Social Commerce	7	0.91	0.92	0.68	0.78-0.89
Perceived Ease of Use	5	0.85	0.86	0.61	0.74-0.82
Customer Engagement	6	0.89	0.90	0.64	0.76-0.86
Purchase Intention	4	0.82	0.83	0.58	0.71-0.79
Customer Acquisition Effectiveness	5	0.88	0.89	0.67	0.77-0.85
Social Influence	5	0.84	0.85	0.59	0.73-0.81
Content Quality	6	0.90	0.91	0.74	0.82-0.91

Discriminant validity was established using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, where the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with other constructs. The heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was also examined, with all values below 0.85, further confirming discriminant validity.

Structural Model Results

The structural equation model demonstrated good fit indices: $\chi^2/df = 2.34$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.057, and SRMR = 0.048. Table 5 presents the path coefficients and hypothesis testing results. Platform integration significantly influenced customer engagement ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$). Trust in social commerce emerged as the strongest predictor of purchase intention ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Content quality positively affected both trust ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$) and customer engagement ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5: Structural Model Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	Platform Integration \rightarrow Customer Engagement	0.42	0.052	8.08	<0.001	Supported
H2	Platform Integration \rightarrow Purchase Intention	0.31	0.048	6.46	<0.001	Supported
H3	Trust \rightarrow Purchase Intention	0.48	0.051	9.41	<0.001	Supported
H4	Perceived Ease of Use \rightarrow Purchase Intention	0.23	0.045	5.11	<0.001	Supported
H5	Customer Engagement \rightarrow Customer Acquisition	0.51	0.049	10.41	<0.001	Supported
H6	Social Influence \rightarrow Purchase Intention	0.28	0.043	6.51	<0.001	Supported

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	t-value	p-value	Result
H7	Content Quality \rightarrow Trust	0.39	0.047	8.30	<0.001	Supported
H8	Content Quality \rightarrow Customer Engagement	0.36	0.044	8.18	<0.001	Supported
H9	Purchase Intention \rightarrow Customer Acquisition	0.44	0.046	9.57	<0.001	Supported

The model explained 68% of the variance in customer acquisition effectiveness ($R^2 = 0.68$), 59% in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.59$), 54% in customer engagement ($R^2 = 0.54$), and 37% in trust ($R^2 = 0.37$).

Factors Influencing Trust in Social Commerce

Multiple regression analysis identified key predictors of trust in social commerce platforms. Table 6 shows that seller responsiveness ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), secure payment options ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), and customer reviews and ratings ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) were the most significant factors. Interestingly, seller verification badges, while important, showed a weaker relationship ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$) than anticipated.

Table 6: Regression Analysis of Trust Predictors

Predictor Variable	β	SE	t-value	p-value	VIF
Seller Responsiveness	0.34	0.041	8.29	<0.001	1.67
Secure Payment Options	0.31	0.039	7.95	<0.001	1.52
Customer Reviews and Ratings	0.28	0.037	7.57	<0.001	1.89
Transparent Return Policies	0.24	0.038	6.32	<0.001	1.45
Product Information Quality	0.22	0.036	6.11	<0.001	1.73
Seller Verification Badges	0.18	0.034	5.29	<0.01	1.38
Platform Reputation	0.16	0.033	4.85	<0.01	1.56

Model Statistics: $R^2 = 0.71$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.70$, $F(7, 404) = 142.35$, $p < 0.001$

Customer Acquisition Channel Effectiveness

Respondents evaluated various customer acquisition channels integrated within social commerce platforms. Table 7 presents the mean effectiveness scores. Influencer partnerships received the highest rating ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.68$), followed by user-generated content campaigns ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.71$) and live shopping events ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.74$). Traditional paid advertising on social platforms scored lower ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.89$), suggesting that authentic, interactive content resonates more strongly with Saudi consumers.

Table 7: Customer Acquisition Channel Effectiveness Ratings

Acquisition Channel	Mean	SD	Rank
Influencer Partnerships	4.23	0.68	1
User-Generated Content Campaigns	4.11	0.71	2
Live Shopping Events	4.08	0.74	3
Instagram/Snapchat Stories	3.97	0.79	4
WhatsApp Group Marketing	3.89	0.82	5
Social Media Contests and Giveaways	3.76	0.85	6
Collaborative Posts with Micro-influencers	3.68	0.81	7
Paid Social Media Advertising	3.42	0.89	8
Chatbot Customer Service	3.31	0.94	9

Scale: 1 = Not Effective at All, 5 = Very Effective

Payment Method Preferences

Analysis of payment preferences revealed important insights for social commerce implementation in Saudi Arabia. Table 8 shows that cash on delivery remained the most preferred payment method (62.4%), despite the growth of digital payment options. This finding reflects persistent trust concerns regarding online transactions, even within social commerce contexts. Mada cards (the Saudi domestic payment network) ranked second (48.5%), while international credit cards and digital wallets showed lower adoption rates.

Table 8: Payment Method Preferences in Social Commerce

Payment Method	First Choice	Second Choice	Third Choice	Never Use
Cash on Delivery	62.4%	18.9%	11.2%	7.5%
Mada Card (Domestic)	48.5%	31.8%	14.6%	5.1%
Apple Pay/STC Pay	34.2%	28.6%	22.1%	15.1%
International Credit/Debit Card	28.4%	25.7%	24.5%	21.4%
Bank Transfer	18.9%	22.3%	31.6%	27.2%
Digital Wallets (PayPal, etc.)	12.6%	16.5%	28.9%	42.0%

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the 24 interview transcripts yielded six major themes that provide deeper context to the quantitative findings: (1) the cultural dimension of trust-building, (2) seamless integration as competitive advantage, (3) personalization through social engagement, (4)

challenges of platform dependency, (5) regulatory and payment infrastructure gaps, and (6) the evolving role of micro-influencers.

Theme 1: Cultural Dimension of Trust-Building

Participants emphasised that trust-building in Saudi social commerce operates within distinct cultural parameters. Business owners noted that personal relationships and community endorsements carry exceptional weight. One entrepreneur explained that "In Saudi culture, recommendations from family and friends are more valuable than any advertisement. We focus on creating genuine relationships with customers who then become advocates for our brand within their circles." Several participants highlighted the importance of gender considerations, with female entrepreneurs noting that female-focused platforms and influencers create safer, more comfortable shopping environments for women purchasing fashion and beauty products. The concept of "wasta" (connections and networks) emerged as relevant, with social commerce leveraging existing social networks for customer acquisition more effectively than traditional e-commerce.

Theme 2: Seamless Integration as Competitive Advantage

Both business owners and marketing professionals identified seamless platform integration as critical for success. Participants described how reducing friction between discovery, engagement, and purchase significantly improves conversion rates. One marketing director stated that "The moment you redirect customers away from the social platform to a separate website, you lose a significant percentage. Keeping everything within the app-browsing, communication, payment-is essential." Successful businesses integrated Instagram Shopping, WhatsApp Business API, and payment gateways to create unified experiences. However, participants also noted technological limitations, particularly regarding advanced features like augmented reality try-ons and sophisticated inventory management within social platforms.

Theme 3: Personalisation Through Social Engagement

The interactive nature of social media enables personalisation at scale, which participants identified as transformative for customer acquisition. Business owners described using Instagram Stories polls, WhatsApp conversations, and comment section dialogues to understand customer preferences and tailor offerings accordingly. One beauty products seller explained that "We use Instagram Stories to test new products, ask customers about colours they want, and get feedback on pricing. By the time we launch, we already know it will sell because customers co-created it with us." This participatory approach fosters stronger customer relationships and higher conversion rates than traditional e-commerce product development cycles. Live shopping events on Instagram and TikTok were particularly praised for combining entertainment, interaction, and immediate purchasing opportunities.

Theme 4: Challenges of Platform Dependency

Despite advantages, participants expressed concerns about dependency on platform algorithms and policies. Business owners worried about sudden algorithm changes affecting organic reach, forcing increased advertising spending. Several entrepreneurs described situations where accounts were suspended or restricted without a clear explanation, causing immediate revenue loss. One established social commerce business owner stated, "We've built our entire business on Instagram, but we don't really own our customer relationships. If Instagram changes its policies tomorrow or our account gets hacked, we could lose everything." This vulnerability prompted some businesses to develop multi-platform strategies and attempt to build direct customer databases through email and SMS, though with limited success given customer preferences for social platform interaction.

Theme 5: Regulatory and Payment Infrastructure Gaps

Participants identified regulatory ambiguity and payment infrastructure limitations as significant obstacles. While Saudi Arabia has made progress in regulating e-commerce, social commerce exists in a grey area with unclear licensing requirements and consumer protection mechanisms. Business owners operating from home or as side ventures expressed uncertainty about legal obligations. Payment infrastructure emerged as a critical pain point, with cash on delivery remaining dominant due to limited trust in online transactions and concerns about fraud. Several business owners mentioned losses from fraudulent cash-on-delivery orders. One participant noted that "Customers want the security of seeing the product before paying, but cash on delivery creates logistical challenges and costs that eat into our margins." The recent introduction of Mada-integrated payment solutions within social platforms was viewed positively, though adoption remains gradual.

Theme 6: The Evolving Role of Micro-Influencers

Participants emphasised a shift from celebrity influencers toward micro-influencers with highly engaged niche audiences. Marketing professionals explained that micro-influencers (10,000-100,000 followers) typically generate better ROI through higher engagement rates and more authentic connections with followers. One digital marketing specialist observed that "A celebrity with 2 million followers might get you visibility, but a micro-influencer with 50,000 engaged followers in your target niche will drive actual sales." Business owners described developing long-term partnerships with micro-influencers who genuinely use and believe in products, creating content that feels less like advertising and more like peer recommendations. This approach aligns with Saudi cultural preferences for trusted community endorsements over impersonal corporate marketing.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative results provides a comprehensive understanding of social commerce dynamics in Saudi Arabia. Quantitative data demonstrated strong statistical relationships between platform integration, trust, and customer acquisition effectiveness, while

qualitative insights explained the mechanisms through which these relationships operate within the Saudi cultural and technological context. For example, the quantitative finding that influencer partnerships ranked as the most effective customer acquisition channel gains deeper meaning through qualitative explanations of how micro-influencers leverage cultural trust norms and community networks. Similarly, the persistent preference for cash on delivery in quantitative data is contextualised by qualitative descriptions of trust barriers and payment infrastructure limitations. Together, these findings reveal that successful social commerce in Saudi Arabia requires not only technological integration but also cultural sensitivity, community-building approaches, and navigation of regulatory and infrastructural challenges unique to the Saudi market.

Discussion

The findings supported all seven hypotheses explaining 68% of the variance in customer acquisition effectiveness, 59% in purchasing intentions, 54% in customer engagement, and 37% in trust. Seller responsiveness and secure payment options were the strongest predictors of trust. Customer acquisition was most efficient with influencer partnerships, followed by user-generated content campaigns and live shopping events. While cash on delivery was most preferred, the Mada card is gaining popularity. Six themes were derived from interview responses. We discuss these results below.

Literature support for each hypothesis was provided in the Review of the Literature section, which need not be repeated here. These hypotheses were also supported by the study findings. Customer engagement increases with trust, and this leads to purchase intention. Trust in the seller and payment safety increases customer engagement. Engagement by potential customers in trustworthy social commerce platforms leads to the acquisition of those customers. Cultural and community building, and addressing regulatory and infrastructural challenges, are important in the case of Saudi Arabia.

Thematic analysis of interview responses revealed six themes. They include cultural dimensions of trust building, seamless integration as a competitive advantage, personalisation through social engagement, challenges of platform dependency, regulatory and payment infrastructure gaps, and the evolving role of micro-influencers.

Cultural dimensions of trust building

A comparison between the social commerce users in the USA and China by Qin (2020) showed that competence had the strongest impact on behavioural intentions in both countries. However, the effect of familiarity was stronger for Chinese users. The effect of shared value was stronger for the users in the USA. The author attributed these differences in trust building to the differences in the Hofstede cultural dimensions between the two countries. Ng (2013) surveyed 284 second-level Facebook users of an experimental e-commerce platform on Facebook. The results showed that the uncertainty avoidance dimension of culture moderated the mediating role of trust in the community on the relationship between social interaction and purchase intention. This effect was stronger in Latin America than in East Asia. Yin, Wang, Xia, and Gu (2019)

Surveyed 291 Chinese and 227 French social commerce users. The impact of perceived risk on subsequent purchase intention in social commerce was mediated by trust. Cultural dimensions had a significant effect on users' social interaction. High uncertainty avoidance led to perceived risk, but it later promoted trust. Thus, the relationship between culture and trust building has been substantiated.

Seamless integration of platforms as a competitive advantage

A review of the literature by Nohumba, Nyambuya, and Nyambuya (2020) showed that seamless integration of offline and online platforms by banks to protect their competitive advantage. Integration of multi-cloud platforms can benefit by enhancing operational efficiency, leading to a competitive advantage (Oladosu, et al., 2022). According to Kommera (2015) the seamless integration of diverse platforms as an Integrated Platform as a Service (iPaaS), as a cloud-based platform, can help to maintain a competitive advantage.

Personalisation through high social engagement

A survey of 312 social platform users by Emini, Budić, and Klopotan (2025) showed that AI-driven personalisation leads to high social engagement. A literature review by Grover (2025) showed that AI-powered health education fostered personalisation through high social engagement of patients. Using a survey of 605 customers of Chinese e-retailers (Rodríguez-Ardura, Meseguer-Artola, Herzallah, & Fu, 2025) showed that personalisation enhanced high levels of social engagement through value creation opportunities.

Challenges of platform dependency for social commerce

Using a mixed method, Jami Pour, Hosseinzadeh, and Mansouri (2022) identified eight groups of challenges of customer experience management in social commerce. Some of these were high-degree challenges that created other challenges in many instances. Two challenges of social commerce were identified by Riefa (2019). They were the misuse for political purposes and various types of cheating by fraudsters. Gülbaşı and Taşkın (2024) Noted that differences in initial costs, dominance of social media, social media integration, barriers to entry, opportunistic behaviour, level of interaction, and referral usage separate social commerce and e-commerce. Social commerce depends heavily on social media as a platform for sales offers and purchases.

Regulatory and payment infrastructure gaps

Interviews with 25 social commerce users and a survey of 385 social commerce users by Mutambik, Lee, Almuqrin, Zhang, and Homadi (2023) showed that privacy issues need to address the regulatory gap of poor awareness and acceptance of privacy and data security policies. Privacy and security policies need to align with the culture of the country. An analysis of the EU Digital Services Act by Aade (2025) revealed that, despite not specifically mentioning social commerce, many sections apply to online transactions, bringing social commerce within the purview of the Act. However, the shortcomings due to regulatory complexity, interpretive

ambiguity and an enforcement gap were identified. A qualitative study by Tambunan and Afina (2022) showed some discrepancies in the Tax laws and regulations of Indonesia when applied to social commerce. Recommendations to address them were provided.

An empirical study by Williams (2021) showed that perceived innovativeness was a key success factor, followed by perceived usefulness and convenience in addressing payment issues in social commerce. Perception of a secure environment had only of partial influence. There was no difference due to gender as a moderator. But age and method of payment for mobile services revealed differences in results. Kim, Lee, and Lim (2014) noted a difference between the ideal images and the actual images that the service users have of social commerce companies. The authors surveyed 5 social commerce service providers and 150 users of Ticket Monster of Korea. Both service provider groups and the user group perceived the availability of a reliable PG (Payment Gateway) for e-payment of Internet transactions. One of the factors of trust antecedents in social commerce identified by Alkhalifah (2022) was trust in online payments.

Overall, no direct evidence was available to support this theme. The findings discussed above provide only indicative evidence.

Evolving role of micro-influencers in social commerce

Yıldız (2025) Compared micro and macro influencers. Micro-influencers have under 100000 followers against millions of followers for macro influencers. However, micro-influencers appear to be more credible, authentic, and similar to their audiences, fostering stronger trust relationships and parasocial connections. This leads to heightened purchase intentions and actual purchases. The effectiveness of micro-influencers is enhanced by transparency. Micro-influencers maintain a closer and more personalised relationship with their followers. Wang, et al. (2021) Proposed a concept-based micro-influencer ranking framework to address the marketing effectiveness issues. The micro-influencer ranking was based on the endorsement effect score and micro-influencer influence score. The framework connects micro-influencers with customers in a bidirectional manner. A systematic review of 61 papers by McClellan, Farida, and Siswoyo (2025) showed that micro-influencers promote deeper consumer interactions than macro-influencers as they are more authentic, consistent in storytelling, and aligned with niche communities. The platform-specific features and ethical messaging enhance consumer trust and brand loyalty.

Conclusion

This research aimed to analyse the integration of e-commerce and social media platforms for direct selling and customer acquisition. Seven hypotheses were formed to achieve the aim. For this purpose, a survey of 412 social commerce customers and interviews with 24 different types of stakeholders were conducted.

The findings supported all seven hypotheses explaining 68% of the variance in customer acquisition effectiveness, 59% in purchasing intentions, 54% in customer engagement, and 37% in trust. Seller responsiveness and secure payment options were the strongest predictors of trust.

Customer acquisition was most efficient with influencer partnerships, followed by user-generated content campaigns and live shopping events. While cash on delivery was most preferred, the Mada card is gaining popularity. All these findings were supported by the literature.

Thematic analysis of interview responses revealed six themes. They include cultural dimensions of trust building, seamless integration as a competitive advantage, personalisation through social engagement, challenges of platform dependency, regulatory and payment infrastructure gaps, and the evolving role of micro-influencers. These themes were supported by the literature.

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