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Navigating the Digital Marketplace: A Qualitative Study of Generation Y's Retail and Social Commerce Preferences in South Africa

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Abstract
This study explores Generation Y's social commerce and retail preferences in South Africa, including online behaviors, product types, social commerce platforms, and optimal retail formats. Using qualitative focus groups comprised of participants selected via purposive sampling, the study determines a strong preference of Generation Y consumers for the convenience of online shopping as opposed to shopping at traditional brick-and-mortar stores. Instagram and Facebook Marketplace emerge as the dominant social commerce platforms, backed by their visual nature and influencer culture. Electronics, fashion, beauty products, books and homeware are the most popular product categories. Trustworthiness and reliability emerged as major concerns among participants, playing a decisive role in their purchase intention. This study addresses a significant literature void by placing these behaviors in South Africa's unique digital landscape, which is defined by economic disparity and varying levels of digital accessibility. The outcomes provide practical insights for retailers that want to develop and enhance their operations on social commerce platforms and drive plans to increase sales by attracting Generation Y within the rapidly growing digital market.

Keywords: Generation Y, e-commerce, social commerce, South Africa.

JEL classification: M31, L81, O33.

Introduction

The digital era has profoundly transformed consumer behavior, particularly among Generation Y, the first cohort to grow up with the internet and mobile technology as integral parts of their lives (Turner, 2015). Born between 1986 and 2005, Generation Y constitutes a significant segment of the global population and wields substantial purchasing power (Markert, 2004). Similarly, Generation Y has unique characteristics that developed due to the continuous exposure to digital environments which have led to different shopping behaviors compared to previous generations (Seemiller and Grace, 2019).

This is especially true in South Africa where Generation Y is progressively influencing the retail landscape as they come to expect the seamless integration of online and offline experiences and are heavily influenced by social media (Williams and Page, 2011). Consequently, the rapid acceptance of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Snapchat has distorted the borders amongst social interaction and commerce which is transforming these platforms into powerful tools for e-commerce through user-generated content and influencer marketing (Gentina et al., 2018; Lou and Yuan, 2019).

Given a retail environment with modern shopping centers and informal markets in a country with economic inequality and internet access issues like South Africa (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020), these patterns of change in consumers are difficult to explain outside the nature of the retail environment that exists. This study attempts to fill that gap by exploring

Generation Y's retail and social commerce behavior in South Africa.

Accordingly, this study seeks to explore Generation Y's retail and social commerce preferences in South Africa. The study aims to understand the preferred retail format of Generation Y consumers in South Africa, which social commerce platforms they prefer and why, the product categories they most frequently purchase through these platforms, and the challenges and concerns they experience when engaging in social commerce transactions.

This provides businesses with the necessary knowledge to be competitive in an ever-changing retail environment. This study contributes to the larger collection of research on how digital natives are changing commerce in the 21st century by establishing preferred retail channels and social commerce platforms, as well as preference drivers.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review, Section 3 outlines the research methodology, Section 4 discusses the findings, and Section 5 concludes with implications, limitations and recommendations for future research.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Generation Y: A Digital-First Mindset

Generation Y (Millennials and older Generation Z, born 1986 to 2005) are best known as the first to grow up immersed in digital technology, effectively shaping their attitudes and behaviors (Markert, 2004; Seemiller and Grace, 2019; Turner, 2015). Their natively digital mindset is evidenced through a strong preference for easy-to-use, real-time digital experiences and multitasking on many devices and platforms (Prensky, 2012).

Recent research highlights Generation Y's demand for personalization, immediacy, and interactive digital content (Smith, 2021). They expect brands to be present and responsive across digital channels, and value brands that offer integrated, omnichannel experiences (Priporas et al., 2017; Williams and Page, 2011).

While some scholars argue that Generation Y's digital immersion leads to higher digital literacy and adoption of innovation (Turner, 2015), others caution that digital fatigue and privacy concerns are increasingly influencing their online behaviors (Zhang et al., 2020). There is also debate regarding the extent to which digital-first preferences override the desire for in-person, tactile retail experiences, suggesting a continued need for hybrid retail models (Verhoef et al., 2015).

Despite extensive global research, there is limited empirical work on how socio-economic factors and digital divides within emerging markets, such as South Africa, moderate these digital-first behaviors (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020).

1.2 Social Commerce: From Social Networks to Shopping Ecosystems

Social commerce has rapidly evolved, with Generation Y at the forefront of this shift (Gentina et al., 2018; Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become critical for product discovery, peer validation and direct purchasing.
Social commerce leverages peer-to-peer interactions, user-generated content, and influencer endorsements to drive engagement and sales (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Visual and video-based platforms are particularly effective, as they align with Generation Y's preference for immersive, interactive content (Smith, 2021). Furthermore, the integration of shopping features such as the new Instagram shops, Facebook Marketplace, as well as TikTok shopping has blurred the lines between social interaction and commerce (Sahu & Bhamboo, 2023).

While research emphasizes the democratizing effect of social commerce in enabling smaller brands and micro-entrepreneurs to reach large audiences (Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016), there are other studies that concentrate on the risks of fraud, misinformation, privacy intrusions, and the potential for social commerce to reinforce existing inequalities (Ezeji, 2024;

Govindankutty & Gopalan, 2023).Further context-specific research on the effectiveness of social commerce strategies in emerging markets where digital infrastructure and consumer confidence vary significantly is needed (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020).

1.3 Omnichannel Retail: Integrating Physical and Digital Touchpoints

Omnichannel retailing being the convenient joining up of online and offline shopping channels is increasingly important for engaging Generation Y (Priporas et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2015).Generation Y consumers also follow the "webrooming" (research online, buy offline) and "showrooming" (research offline, buy online) activities, expecting to receive the same product information, price and service quality across all touchpoints (Priporas et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2015). Mobile devices are at the pivot of this experience, both as research and buying tools (Google, 2016).

While omnichannel strategies are widely advocated, there are researchers who argue that the cost and complexity of integration may not yield commensurate returns in all markets, particularly where digital adoption is skewed (Herhausen et al., 2015). Others note that the success of omnichannel retailing depends on whether the retailer can offer an integrated experience, which for many remains an aspiration (Verhoef et al., 2015).

There is limited empirical research exploring how omnichannel strategies are received and adopted within developing economies like South Africa, particularly how economic disparities and infrastructural limitations shape consumer experiences (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020).

1.4 Influencer Marketing and Social Proof: Trust and Community in the Digital World

When it comes to consumption in Generation Y, influencer marketing and social proof demonstrate prevalence in this generation's consumption. Influencers, especially micro-influencers, are seen as authentic and relatable, allowing their endorsements to be strong motivators (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou and Yuan, 2019).Moreover, Generation Y has more faith in word-of-mouth or user-generated content over traditional advertising (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2015). Social proof, in the form of reviews, likes, and shares, also help to significantly enhance product credibility and purchase intention (Kim and Park, 2013).

The rise of micro-influencers reflects a shift toward authenticity and niche community engagement (De Veirman et al., 2017). There is ongoing debate about the long-term effectiveness of influencer marketing, with some studies suggesting diminishing returns as consumers become more aware of paid partnerships (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Others argue that the key to sustained influence lies in maintaining authenticity and transparency (De Veirman et al., 2017).Little is known about the specific impact of local influencers in South Africa, or how cultural and socio-economic factors shape perceptions of authenticity and trust in influencer marketing (Goldberg and Kotze, 2022).

1.5 Visual and Interactive Content as Key Drivers

Visual and interactive content is a key driver of engagement for Generation Y, who respond more favorably to images, videos, and interactive features than to static, text-based content (Smith, 2021). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube have popularized short-form video, AR filters, and shoppable posts, creating immersive environments for product discovery and purchase (Smith, 2021). Interactive content such as polls, quizzes, and virtual try-ons enhance engagement and deepens the consumer-brand relationship (Nawaz et al., 2025).

While the effectiveness of visual content is widely recognized, some researchers caution that oversaturation and declining attention spans may reduce its impact over time (Smith, 2021). Others highlight that the success of interactive content depends on its relevance and integration with the overall brand narrative (Nawaz et al. 2025). There is a lack of research on the adoption and effectiveness of advanced visual technologies in South African social commerce, particularly among Generation Y (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020).

1.6 Social Commerce in the South African Context: Opportunities and Barriers

South Africa's social commerce landscape is shaped by unique socio-economic and infrastructural challenges, including a pronounced digital divide and concerns about privacy and security (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020; Goldberg and Kotze, 2022).

Generation Y consumers are increasingly engaged on social commerce sites which they use for product exploration, peer-to-peer engagement and purchase (Kemp, 2020). Smartphone penetration and availability of mobile data are increasing social commerce activity particularly among the youth (Kemp, 2020). Even though social commerce's potential to facilitate economic empowerment and entrepreneurship in developing economies is recognized (Gibreel et al., 2018), issues like unequal access to stable internet, digital illiteracy and high incidences of online fraud persist (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020; Goldberg and Kotze, 2022).

It is essential to engage in context-specific research that examines how challenges and opportunities change, more specifically how local retailers can develop social commerce activities that address different needs of distinct segments of Generation Y in South Africa (Chigada and Madzinga, 2020).

2. Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the social commerce and retail format preferences of Generation Y consumers in South Africa. This study adopted a neo-positivist inductive paradigm as it focused on understanding human behavior by employing a qualitative descriptive design (Ayeni et al., 2019; Sandelowski, 2010). Qualitative research can provide a more profound understanding of consumer intentions, motivations and perceptions, providing reasons for their decisions and preferences in the marketplace (Branthwaite and Patterson, 2011).

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants in South Africa who form part of the Generation Y cohort and who have purchased a product on a social commerce platform in the past six months to ensure participants have recent and relevant experiences. An invitation to the study was posted on social commerce platforms including Facebook and Instagram. Three focus group sessions ensued, culminating in a total of 26 participants. Across all three focus groups, participants represented a reasonably balanced gender distribution and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants were primarily urban-based consumers within the Generation Y cohort, all of whom had purchased at least one product via a social commerce platform in the past six months. Focus groups enable a deeper understanding of how consumers think and behave (Mishra, 2016).

A six-phase thematic analysis process devised by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the data, including familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition and reporting. The method allowed the researchers to identify, describe and interpret patterns within the data (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, 2019). Four major themes were identified explaining Generation Y's retail format and social commerce platform preferences in South Africa and provided insights into the product categories sought and challenges experienced.

To ensure coding reliability, two independent qualitative researchers reviewed the preliminary codes and theme structure to ensure consistency and to confirm alignment between the data and the coding framework. Discrepancies were discussed collaboratively until consensus was reached, ensuring that codes accurately represented participants' perspectives.

This process enhanced inter-coder reliability and minimized researcher bias.

Trustworthiness was ensured by considering four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was achieved via prolonged engagement, member checking and persistent observation, while purposeful sampling and thick descriptions ensured transferability. Dependability and confirmability were enhanced by performing an audit trail, peer debriefing and recording and transcribing focus group discussions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Strict ethical guidelines were adhered to when conducting the study. Participants provided informed consent to partake in the study and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were assigned numbers that were used in the reporting of results to protect personal identities. The study was reviewed and approved by the scientific and ethics committees of the affiliated institution, ensuring compliance with ethical standards involved when conducting research on human subjects (Wiles, 2012).

3. Results and Discussion

Four key themes emerged by analyzing the data concerning Generation Y's preference and use of social commerce platforms:

Theme 1: Preferred Retail Format

The study found that most participants prefer to shop online rather than frequent brick-and-mortar stores. Their preference is predominantly due to the convenience offered by online shopping. In addition, participants mentioned that online shopping enables them to compare prices and product alternatives from several different stores without having to physically travel between them. As such, some participants perceive online shopping to be cheaper compared to shopping at physical stores. Participants stated that when shopping online, they can view all the products available for sale in a particular product category, even if those products are out of stock. On the contrary, when shopping at a physical store, one is not always able to see which products are available for sale that might be out of stock at that particular moment.

Participant 8 said: *"I definitely prefer shopping online more than in store…it provides quite a broad platform to compare products"*. Participant 10 noted: *"I don't think I will ever go into a store again to buy a gadget, not even after Covid"*. Participant 12 stated: *"It is more convenient to shop online than to go into a physical store"*. Participant 3 said: *"It makes it easier to see everything instead of in a shop where you go and don't always notice where it is"*. Participant 18 noted: *"If I go to the shop and spend money on petrol and everything and time and going out and I get there and it's not in stock, wasting a lot of time"*.

Recent studies support these findings, indicating that an increasing number of consumers prefer shopping online due to ease of use, convenience and product choice and availability (Priporas et al. 2017; Rahman et al., 2018). A study conducted by Lo et al. (2014) confirms that consumers perceive the price of products from an online retailer to be significantly lower than that of a brick-and-mortar store. Ives et al. (2019) are of the opinion that the convenience, efficiency and perceived economic value of online shopping could disrupt the broader retail industry. Traditional retailers are therefore responding to online competition by offering more discounts and promotions (Grewal et al., 2017). A recent study conducted by Goldberg and Mostert (2025) found that some consumers prefer to shop at physical stores mainly due to more promotions and sales specials offered by these stores.

Theme 2: Preferred Social Commerce Platforms

The results of the study indicate that most participants prefer to shop on Instagram. Users find the platform to be visually appealing, allowing them to see multiple images and videos of the product for sale and allows them the opportunity to see how other consumers on Instagram demonstrate how the product can be used. Some participants commented on the efficiency and practicality of Instagram's user interface, stating how easy it is to search for products and to complete transactions online.

Participant 3 said: *"I prefer Instagram – I'm addicted to that app"*. Participant 2 noted: *"I prefer Instagram for the mere fact that it is a visually appealing platform, and you can see the pricing upfront – and it's also mobile-friendly"*. Participant 6 stated: *"I definitely prefer Instagram because I usually see people wearing stuff and then I look who they've tagged or I get a sponsored ad and it's so easy to just click on it, confirm your details – because Instagram have most of your details so you can just click on autofill and there you go"*.

The results of this study align with those of Herzallah et al. (2022) who found that ease of use, especially amongst younger consumers, contributes to Instagram being the preferred social commerce platform. A study conducted by Djafarova and Bowes (2021) further support these findings by affirming that advertisements, influencers and user-generated content have a positive influence on the purchase intention of consumers who shop on Instagram. User-generated content has been found to have a positive significant influence on perceived trust, which in turn has a positive significance on purchase intention within the social commerce context (Zakaria et al., 2024).

Another popular social commerce platform among participants on which to browse and shop is Facebook Marketplace. The reason for the platform's popularity is more economic in nature as participants perceive Facebook Marketplace to offer better prices, attractive deals on products and services, and the option to negotiate prices is deemed an added advantage. Participants find it particularly useful to have direct and immediate contact with the seller by using the Facebook Messenger function. Participants also noted that the wider availability of cheaper second-hand products is an appealing factor.

Participant 2 said: *"You really get good deals on Facebook Marketplace*". Participant 7 echoed this by stating: *"I really enjoy the deals that you can get on Marketplace"*. Participant 5 said: *"It is much easier to negotiate the price on Facebook"*.

The findings of a study conducted by Hajli et al. (2017) affirm that Facebook Marketplace is one of the more popular social commerce platforms among consumers and that the familiarity and social presence of the platform increases purchase intentions. Furthermore, the results of this study align with the findings of Sharma et al. (2024) that confirm economic motivation significantly impacts consumers' decision to purchase products on Facebook Marketplace, specifically due to the availability of lower-priced second-hand clothing items and the opportunity to bargain with sellers. Furthermore, the results of this study are consistent with previous research conducted by Guo and Li (2022), asserting that consumers find value in their ability to obtain feedback and interact with the seller via the direct messaging functions on social commerce platforms, which in turn has a positive impact in repurchase intention.

Theme 3: Product Categories

Electronics, fashion, beauty products, books and homeware emerged as the top product categories purchased by participants on social commerce platforms. Participants noted that these products are clearly displayed online with user-generated content showing how products are used by fellow consumers. In addition, reviews provided by consumers who have tested or used such products previously provide additional information and support purchase decisions. Very few participants indicated that they purchase jewelry or food items on social commerce platforms. Most participants stated that they prefer to purchase lower-priced products on social commerce platforms, while opting to purchase more expensive or complex products, as well as perishable items from reputable and more established e-commerce sites or physical stores, as most of these channels allow them to test or evaluate the product beforehand.

Participant 15 noted: *"I sometimes find face-to-face stores more trustworthy when it comes to expensive purchases"*. Participant 16 said: *"I can also touch and feel the product and* *then I feel more comfortable spending money like that"*. Participant 18 stated: *"Things like food products I'd rather buy in a physical shop than in an online store"*. Participant 2 noted: *"On social commerce I'd buy gadgets as well as other electronics, which is really helpful, especially if you can't get it in a small town like Potchefstroom"*. Participant 17 added: *"Mostly electronics because it's more reliable for me as a consumer to purchase these online"*. Participant 21 said: *"I have mostly bought clothes on social media"*. Participant 10 noted that they would not buy expensive products on social commerce by stating: *"Second-hand items; not products that are extremely expensive"*.

These findings are congruent with a study conducted by Maia et al. (2018) affirming that electronics and books are amongst the top product categories purchased on social commerce platforms. Furthermore, Van Tran et al. (2023) found that social commerce platforms have become a dominant source of fashion items where reference groups like friends, celebrities and influencers inspire various styles.

However, Yusuf et al. (2024) found that consumers are apprehensive to purchase beauty products and fashion items online due to information asymmetry and the inability to touch, smell and test the product prior to purchase.

Theme 4: Challenges in Social Commerce

The two dominant challenges that emerged from analyzing the data are trustworthiness and reliability. Participants seldom trust sellers on social commerce platforms due to past experiences in which they were scammed. In addition, participants stated that they do not always receive the product advertised, and that at times, a different product will be delivered, or the product will be fake or riddled with defects. A logistical issue then ensues trying to return the product to the seller and to request a refund. At this stage, sellers often disappear or do not respond to buyers' complaints or refund requests.

A few participants mentioned that user-generated content, product reviews and commentary on social commerce platforms cannot always be reliable, as companies sponsor consumers to promote products and services, and as such, a true and reliable review is not reflected.

Participant 9 said: *"Some companies, kick-starter companies or companies that just started, sometimes they buy their commentary and reviews, which means that in the beginning, if it's something new, you can't really rely on those comments and reviews"*. Participant 20 added: *"…with Facebook Marketplace, some people scam you"*. Participant 3 noted: *"People can be very unreliable on Facebook Marketplace"*. Participant 11 said: *"On Facebook Marketplace and Gumtree, you are only shown what you want to see, but not everything about the product for sale"*. Participant 5 echoed this sentiment by saying: *"You can't always trust the picture that is shown"*.

The results of this study are aligned with previous studies indicating that trust plays a critical role in consumers' purchase intentions and word-of-mouth referrals (Hajli et al., 2017; Kim and Park, 2013). A study conducted by Acoba et al. (2023) confirmed that consumers frequently encounter fraudulent activities when shopping online including the delivery of defective products, sellers who disappear once the transaction has been concluded and misleading or false information provided by the seller concerning the product or service on offer, customer reviews, and contact details of the business or seller themselves. In their study Pour et al. (2022) emphasizes the importance of businesses to effectively manage challenges prevalent on social commerce platforms to ensure positive customer experience, and by so doing, increasing purchase intention.

Conclusions, limitations and future directions of research

This study provides insight into the retail and social commerce preferences of Generation

Y in South Africa. The findings suggest that participants choose to shop online as opposed to shopping at traditional brick-and-mortar stores. This decision can primarily be attributed to the convenience offered by online shopping, the ability to compare prices and products across a wide spectrum of online stores from the comfort of their homes, and the shared perception that products and services are offered at cheaper prices online than in physical stores.

The study underscores the importance of retailers in South Africa offering a seamless online shopping experience by ensuring that consumers can search for, evaluate and pay for products quickly and easily on intuitive, user-friendly social commerce platforms. Retailers should also recognize that Generation Y actively compare products and prices online and should therefore clearly display product prices and product details to facilitate comparison. Goldberg and Mostert (2025) found that some consumers prefer to shop at brick-and-mortar stores due to the perception of such stores offering more promotions and bargains. As such, retailers selling on social commerce platforms may choose to offer price-matching guarantees, as this would increase purchase intention among Generation Y consumers who are promotion focused (Verma et al., 2019).

Retailers targeting Generation Y consumers should ensure their presence on Instagram and Facebook Marketplace to effectively reach and communicate with this cohort. For Instagram, retailers should invest in high-quality visual content including photos and videos of products offered. Influencer collaboration and user-generated content campaigns could increase sales, brand awareness and customer engagement (Agustian et al., 2023). When advertising on Facebook Marketplace, retailers should emphasize low pricing and present the option to negotiate price using Facebook Messenger with the aim of building rapport with potential buyers. Casimiro et al. (2022) found that Facebook Messenger is a preferred means of communication, and that the information, assurance and empathy received via messages have a positive impact on purchase intention.

Retailers selling higher-priced or complex products on social commerce platforms should offer features that would allow consumers to test the product prior to purchase, for example, a virtual try-on function. In addition, detailed product specifications should be offered, as well as generous return policies offer low levels of return effort. This will enhance Generation Y's confidence and improve purchase intention (Jeng, 2017).

Trust and perceived risk are significant concerns shared among consumers when shopping online, which in turn affects purchase and repurchase intention (Lazaroiu et al., 2020). To improve consumer confidence, build trust and ensure sustained growth in social commerce, businesses must ensure that various trust-building strategies are put in place. Consumers should feel safe when payments are made online and should be offered fair and transparent return policies. In addition, retailers should provide in-depth and accurate product descriptions, highlighting any possible damage or defects to products, specifically when selling second-hand items. Customer complaints should be handled effectively and efficiently to maintain credibility and to foster long-term consumer trust.

Some limitations of this study were identified. Firstly, considering the qualitative nature of the study, a relatively small sample size was realized using purposive sampling. Even though rich insights were obtained, the findings may not be extrapolated to a wider population of Generation Y consumers across South Africa and other parts of the world. Secondly, the study focused on understanding consumer perspectives, failing to explore the viewpoints of retailers on social commerce platforms. Such insight could have provided a more holistic understanding of social commerce behavior and challenges. Thirdly, the study investigated Generation Y's preferences and perceived challenges, but did not quantify purchase frequency, transaction values, or conversion rates. This limits the study's ability to offer more predictive insights.

It is recommended that future studies implement a quantitative approach, including larger and more representative samples across different countries and demographic groups, as this would enable greater generalization of results. Furthermore, future research could focus on exploring the perspectives of retailers and social commerce managers to better understand different operations challenges and opportunities in providing a safe and enjoyable online shopping environment.

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