

Digital Influence and Social Commerce: The Role of Online Social Experience in Beauty Consumption

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Abstract: This study investigates how digital social experiences influence consumer buying behavior in the beauty and personal care market in Bahrain. Grounded in Social Learning Theory and the Theory of Reasoned Action, the research focuses on three experiential constructs—social presence, peer influence, and community engagement—within the context of social commerce. Using survey data from 385 female consumers and applying multiple linear regression, the findings reveal that all three constructs significantly predict buying behavior, with social presence emerging as the most influential factor ($\beta = 0.583$, $p < .001$), followed by peer influence ($\beta = 0.421$, $p < .001$) and community engagement ($\beta = 0.269$, $p < .001$). These results highlight the dominant role of interpersonal dynamics and online social validation in shaping consumer decisions in digitally mediated environments. Unlike traditional models that emphasize internal affective or cognitive processes, this study positions external social cues as central drivers of hedonic consumption. The research contributes to the literature by contextualizing social commerce within a Gulf setting and offers actionable insights for marketers aiming to enhance digital engagement strategies in culturally cohesive, high-touch markets like Bahrain.

Keywords: Social Commerce, Digital Social Experience, Consumer Buying Behavior, Community Engagement, Beauty Industry, Bahrain.

Type: Research paper



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1. Introduction

The proliferation of digital technologies and the rapid expansion of social media platforms have transformed how consumers interact with brands, acquire product information, and make purchase decisions. One of the most significant developments in this landscape is the rise of social commerce—the fusion of e-commerce and social networking that enables users to discover, review, and buy products within online communities. Unlike traditional e-commerce, which is often transactional and isolated, social commerce thrives on interpersonal influence, digital engagement, and community-driven validation (Chen, 2019; Handarkha, 2020).

At the heart of social commerce lies online social experience, a multidimensional construct that captures how consumers engage emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally with others in digital environments. In beauty and personal care sectors—where identity, appearance, and social signaling are especially salient—this digital social influence has become a powerful force shaping consumer behavior (Zhang & Zhou, 2019). Social platforms serve not only as information channels but as experiential spaces where users model behaviors, seek affirmation, and co-create brand meaning. This shift from solitary to socially embedded consumption underscores the need to investigate the mechanisms through which online interactions influence purchase intent.

Theoretically, this research is grounded in Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Social Learning Theory posits that individuals form preferences and behaviors by observing others—particularly peers, influencers, or reference groups—whose actions they perceive as credible or rewarding. In a social commerce context, this theory explains how consumers learn about new beauty trends or products through vicarious experiences shared on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube (Hu, Chen, & Davison, 2019). Simultaneously, the Theory of Reasoned Action explains how attitudes and perceived social norms—frequently amplified in online networks—drive behavioral intentions. Together, these theories provide a robust lens to study the psychological underpinnings of digital influence in the beauty market.

In the Gulf region, particularly Bahrain, this dynamic is especially pronounced. The local beauty and personal care industry is expected to reach BD 85 million by 2026, driven by a young, digitally connected population and evolving cultural norms that blend tradition with modernity (News of Bahrain, 2019). While regional research has traditionally focused on price sensitivity, product quality, or brand reputation, there is limited empirical work examining how online social experience affects beauty consumption in this context. Existing studies on Bahrain's consumer behavior (Al-Khalifa et al., 2021) often overlook the emotional and interactive dimensions of digital engagement that are becoming increasingly central in shaping buying decisions.

This paper addresses that gap by shifting the analytical lens toward digital social experience and its influence on consumer buying behavior in the Bahraini beauty market. Leveraging the same dataset used in prior research—which examined social, cognitive, affective, and hedonic dimensions—we isolate and reframe the social experience variable through the prism of online interactions. The context remains female consumers in Bahrain, ensuring consistency and comparability while allowing for a novel theoretical and practical emphasis.

This study has three key objectives: (1) To examine the role of online social experience in shaping beauty product consumption among female consumers in Bahrain within a social commerce context; (2) To apply and extend Social Learning Theory (SLT) and Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) to explain how digital peer influence, social proof, and observational learning impact purchase intentions; and (3) To provide regionally grounded insights that inform digital

marketing strategies for brands operating in the Gulf region's beauty industry, emphasizing socially embedded marketing approaches.

This research contributes to both academic literature and managerial practice by offering a culturally contextualized, theory-driven examination of how digital social influence shapes hedonic consumption. By integrating psychological theories and empirical data from a culturally rich market, the study aims to enhance our understanding of experience-based marketing in an increasingly digitized consumer landscape.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Commerce and the Digital Beauty Consumer

Social commerce—the convergence of e-commerce and social media platforms—has transformed how beauty products are marketed, evaluated, and purchased (Chen, 2019; Li, 2022). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat enable real-time engagement with branded content, peer reviews, and influencer recommendations, all of which contribute to shaping consumer perceptions and purchase intentions. In beauty and personal care markets, where aesthetic validation, identity signaling, and emotional gratification are pivotal, social commerce enables a uniquely immersive, participatory buying experience (Whang et al., 2021; Roz, 2021).

This participatory shift is further supported by Guan, Zhang, and Wang (2019), who emphasize how digital brand communities facilitate value co-creation, with users actively shaping brand meaning through peer discourse, product feedback, and shared imagery. Moreover, Khodabandeh and Lindh (2020) note that trust in online environments—shaped by perceived design quality, security, and social interactions—is critical in mediating purchase intention within social commerce interfaces.

In collectivist cultures like Bahrain, peer influence and social approval are foundational to consumption patterns (Zhang & Zhou, 2019). Consumers do not merely consume content; they interact with it, co-create meaning, and integrate social feedback into their decision-making processes. Hence, understanding online social experience requires a shift from passive exposure to a model of active digital engagement embedded in culturally resonant social dynamics.

2.2. Social Experience in Online Contexts

Online social experience refers to perceived interpersonal connectedness, peer validation, and community participation in digital environments (Guan et al., 2019; Handarkha, 2020). Unlike offline interactions, digital social experiences are algorithmically mediated—filtered, amplified, or suppressed based on platform logic and user behavior (Ramanathan et al., 2017). These dynamics shape not just information exposure but also psychological responses to brand cues and peer feedback. Key components of this experience include:

- Social presence, or the feeling of “being with others” in a virtual space, which enhances perceived intimacy and co-presence (Li, 2022; Whang et al., 2021).

- Vicarious learning, where users model behavior based on influencers and peers, as theorized by Bandura (1977) and supported empirically by Hu, Chen, and Davison (2019), who found that source credibility and social support strongly affect impulsive buying in social commerce.
- Social proof, whereby conformity is driven by visible metrics such as likes, shares, and reviews (Shahpasandi, 2020).
- Emotional contagion, wherein peer sentiment, tone, and expressive cues impact affective reactions and perceived value (Shahpasandi, 2020).

This expanded framework also includes community engagement as highlighted by Guan et al. (2019), where online brand communities offer a sense of belonging and identity co-construction that can significantly elevate consumer loyalty and advocacy.

2.3. Theoretical Underpinnings: Social Learning Theory in Digital Commerce

Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory (SLT) remains foundational in explaining how individuals adopt behaviors through observation, imitation, and social reinforcement. In social commerce, this includes influencer tutorials, peer product reviews, and unboxing videos—all serving as instructional content that encourages mimetic consumption (Hu et al., 2019; Handayani, 2020).

Khodabandeh and Lindh (2020) further argue that trust and interactivity in digital interfaces enhance these observational pathways, creating psychologically safe environments in which consumers are more likely to imitate peer or influencer behavior.

Simultaneously, the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) posits that attitudes and subjective norms—frequently shaped by online validation and feedback—drive behavioral intentions. As Li (2022) explains, social presence and interactivity in digital environments significantly mediate these norms, especially in identity-relevant categories like beauty, where consumer actions are socially visible.

Together, these theories position the digital social experience as an active, relational mechanism—not just a backdrop—for constructing consumer intent in hedonic markets.

2.4. Empirical Gaps and Regional Relevance

While social commerce has been widely studied in East Asian and Western contexts (e.g., Shahid et al., 2022), the Gulf region remains underexplored. In particular, Bahrain presents a compelling hybrid of conservative cultural norms and advanced digital infrastructure (Al-Khalifa et al., 2021). Despite high social media penetration, research in this setting often centers on utilitarian aspects such as pricing, convenience, or product availability (Hayat & Victor, 2020), omitting the nuanced psychological and experiential factors at play.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on digitally mediated social experience—defined through presence, influence, and community—and how it affects consumer behavior in the beauty and personal care domain. By drawing on recent work in social trust, user-generated content, and platform interactivity

(Chen, 2019; Li, 2022; Guan et al., 2019), the study offers both theoretical refinement and regional relevance.

2.5. Study Objectives and Contribution

The core objectives of this study are:

1. To evaluate the relationship between digital social experience and consumer buying behavior in Bahrain's beauty sector.
2. To interpret this relationship through the lens of Social Learning Theory and TRA, with an emphasis on digital peer influence and social validation.
3. To extend the literature on experiential marketing by conceptualizing social commerce as an interactive, emotionally resonant, and culturally embedded construct.

By advancing a focused model of online social influence, this paper contributes theoretically to digital consumer research and practically to platform-specific marketing strategy in beauty and lifestyle domains.

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

3.1. Conceptual Model

This study proposes a model in which digital social experience—a multidimensional construct comprising social presence, peer influence, and community engagement—plays a significant role in shaping consumer buying behavior in the beauty and personal care sector. The framework is grounded in:

- Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which posits that people model behaviors observed in others, particularly when those others are seen as credible, attractive, or socially rewarded.
- Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), which suggests that subjective norms and personal attitudes jointly determine behavioral intentions, particularly when the behavior is socially visible and identity relevant.

Within the context of social commerce, beauty consumers are frequently exposed to influencer content, peer endorsements, live demonstrations, and comment-based feedback that collectively form a socially constructed digital environment. This environment becomes a site for both observational learning and norm internalization, which are theorized to influence actual buying behavior.

3.2. Operationalizing Digital Social Experience

For this study, digital social experience is treated as a formative construct composed of the following dimensions:

1. Social Presence – The perceived intimacy and immediacy of interactions within digital spaces (Li, 2022; Hu et al., 2019).
2. Peer Influence – The behavioral impact of likes, shares, reviews, and influencer endorsements (Shahpasandi, 2020; Handarkha, 2020).

3. Community Engagement – The sense of belonging, participation, and shared identity within online beauty communities (Guan et al., 2019; Khodabandeh & Lindh, 2020).

These dimensions reflect both direct social learning (e.g., mimicking beauty tutorials) and indirect social reinforcement (e.g., following trends validated by others).

3.3. Hypotheses Development

The following hypotheses are developed.

H1: Social Presence is positively associated with consumer buying behavior in the beauty sector.

Social presence enhances emotional immersion and interpersonal resonance in online environments. Prior studies show that users who perceive a strong presence from peers or influencers are more likely to internalize social cues and translate them into consumption choices (Li, 2022; Whang et al., 2021).

H2: Peer Influence positively predicts consumer buying behavior.

In social commerce, peer-generated content serves as both informational and normative guidance. The number of likes, recommendations, or endorsements plays a crucial role in reinforcing perceived value and reducing purchase anxiety (Hu et al., 2019).

H3: Community Engagement has a positive effect on consumer buying behavior.

Belonging to online beauty communities fosters shared meaning, product attachment, and brand loyalty. Participatory behaviors such as commenting, sharing, or co-creating content increase emotional investment, which in turn raises buying likelihood (Guan et al., 2019; Roz, 2021).

H4: Digital Social Experience, as a higher-order construct, significantly predicts buying behavior.

The cumulative effect of social presence, peer influence, and community engagement is hypothesized to be a strong predictor of behavior, particularly in product categories that are socially visible, emotionally salient, and symbolically expressive (Bandura, 1977).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Philosophy and Approach

This study adopts a positivist paradigm, emphasizing objective measurement and statistical generalization to uncover patterns in consumer behavior. It is grounded in a deductive approach, wherein hypotheses are derived from established theoretical models—specifically Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). This framework enables the examination of how digital social environments influence behavioral intention and action within the context of beauty product consumption.

4.2. Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed to collect data at a single point in time from a broad demographic of female consumers in Bahrain. This design is well-suited for testing the hypothesized relationships between digital social experience and consumer buying behavior. The research is explanatory in nature, focusing on the empirical assessment of four proposed hypotheses.

4.3. Sampling and Participants

The target population consists of female beauty consumers in Bahrain aged 18 years and above. This demographic was selected due to its high involvement in beauty-related consumption and active engagement with digital platforms relevant to social commerce, including Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. A non-probability convenience sampling method was adopted, supported by digital distribution through beauty-related forums and WhatsApp groups. A total of 385 valid responses were obtained. Respondents were eligible to participate if they had made at least one beauty-related purchase in the past six months and had engaged with at least one digital platform for product research, recommendations, or peer interaction.

4.4. Instrumentation

The structured questionnaire consisted of six sections. The first section collected demographic information including age, income, education level, purchase frequency, and online platform engagement. The second section measured social presence using items adapted from Hu et al. (2019) and Li (2022), assessing perceived immediacy, authenticity, and emotional resonance in online beauty-related interactions. The third section addressed peer influence, based on Handarkha (2020), and included items related to social validation, influencer endorsements, and peer recommendations. The fourth section measured community engagement, following constructs from Guan et al. (2019) and Roz (2021), focusing on active participation in online beauty communities such as commenting, sharing, or seeking advice. Together, these three constructs formed the higher-order concept of digital social experience, which served as the focal independent variable of the study. The final section measured consumer buying behavior, adapted from Bhatt (2018) and Vancic (2020), using items related to purchase frequency, impulsivity, and brand loyalty. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The instrument was pre-tested with a subset of respondents to ensure clarity and comprehension.

4.5. Validity and Reliability

Face and content validity were established through expert reviews and close alignment with previously validated instruments from the literature. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all constructs exceeding the recommended threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$, as per Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). Construct validity was confirmed through exploratory factor analysis, which

revealed distinct factor structures for each experiential dimension, with no problematic cross-loadings.

4.6. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize demographic and behavioral variables. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed to test the reliability of each construct. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess linear relationships among the independent and dependent variables. Standard multiple linear regression analysis was then employed to evaluate the simultaneous effects of the three subcomponents of digital social experience—social presence, peer influence, and community engagement—on consumer buying behavior. A composite model treating digital social experience as a higher-order formative construct was also tested. To ensure model robustness, multicollinearity diagnostics were conducted using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), and all values were found to be below the critical value of 3, indicating no serious multicollinearity.

5. Results

5.1. Descriptive and Reliability Analysis

Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive statistics and internal consistency reliability were assessed. The final sample ($N = 385$) consisted entirely of female respondents residing in Bahrain, with ages ranging from 18 to over 50. Most participants reported moderate to high engagement with digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp for beauty product exploration and purchase decisions. Purchase frequency was high, with over 60% indicating monthly or bi-monthly purchases.

Reliability tests confirmed acceptable internal consistency for all measurement constructs. Cronbach's alpha was .87 for social presence, .82 for peer influence, .79 for community engagement, and .85 for the consumer buying behavior scale. The overall reliability for the full instrument was $\alpha = .89$, well above the threshold recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). These findings affirm the stability and coherence of the measurement model.

5.2. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to explore the strength and direction of associations between the independent variables (social presence, peer influence, community engagement) and the dependent variable (buying behavior). Results revealed strong and statistically significant positive correlations. Social presence showed the strongest relationship with buying behavior ($r = .726, p < .001$), followed by peer influence ($r = .651, p < .001$), and community engagement ($r = .544, p < .001$). These results provide initial empirical support for the conceptual framework and justify proceeding with multiple regression analysis.

5.3. Regression Analysis

A standard multiple linear regression was conducted to determine the collective and individual predictive power of the three dimensions of digital social experience on consumer buying behavior. The regression model was found to be statistically significant: $F(3, 381) = 211.34$, $p < .001$, with an R^2 of .625 and an adjusted R^2 of .621. This indicates that approximately 62% of the variance in consumer buying behavior is explained by the combined effects of social presence, peer influence, and community engagement. The unstandardized and standardized coefficients are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Regression coefficients for digital social experience predicting buying

| Predictor | B | SE | β | t | Sig. |
|----------------------|-------|-------|---------|-------|-------|
| Constant | 0.287 | 0.091 | — | 3.153 | 0.002 |
| Social Presence | 0.498 | 0.032 | 0.583 | 15.48 | 0.000 |
| Peer Influence | 0.323 | 0.038 | 0.421 | 8.491 | 0.000 |
| Community Engagement | 0.207 | 0.035 | 0.269 | 5.914 | 0.000 |

All three experiential predictors were statistically significant at the 1% level. Social presence emerged as the most potent driver of consumer buying behavior ($\beta = .583$, $p < .001$), underscoring the powerful influence of perceived human connection, authenticity, and interaction quality in online beauty communities. Peer influence ($\beta = .421$, $p < .001$) was also a strong predictor, suggesting that social approval, influencer validation, and collective endorsements significantly shape consumers' propensity to buy. Community engagement ($\beta = .269$, $p < .001$), while less dominant, still exerted a meaningful effect, indicating that active participation in beauty forums, chats, and digital conversations reinforces behavioral intention.

5.4. Hypothesis Evaluation

The following conclusions were drawn regarding the hypotheses:

- H1, which proposed a positive relationship between social presence and consumer buying behavior, was strongly supported.
- H2, which suggested that peer influence positively predicts buying behavior, was also supported.
- H3, positing that community engagement significantly contributes to consumer buying behavior, was confirmed.

Together, these results reinforce the assertion that digital social experience exerts a substantial and multi-dimensional influence on consumer decision-making processes in the beauty and personal care sector in Bahrain.

6. Discussion

This study examined the influence of online social experience—captured through constructs such as social presence, peer influence, and digital community engagement—on consumer buying behavior in Bahrain's beauty and personal care market. Distinct from prior research that has emphasized affective or hedonic experience in physical or hybrid retail environments, this paper contributes to the

growing body of literature focused on social commerce dynamics and digitally mediated consumption.

The results reveal that social presence, operationalized as the consumer's perception of real-time interaction, visibility, and human warmth in online platforms, plays a statistically significant and positive role in driving purchase behavior. This aligns with prior research by Li (2022), which highlights the role of perceived interactivity and social connectedness in stimulating online shopping intention. In Bahrain's context—where online retail is expanding alongside strong social networks—this finding suggests that digital trust and visibility serve as substitutes for physical interaction, especially in high-touch product categories like beauty.

Peer influence was also found to be a significant predictor, reinforcing the argument that consumer behavior in social commerce is shaped not only by product features but by peer validation, influencer cues, and algorithmically surfaced popularity metrics (Chen, 2019; Hu et al., 2019). This supports the social learning framework articulated by Bandura (1977), where imitation, observation, and vicarious reinforcement serve as core psychological mechanisms behind online decision-making. In the Bahraini digital landscape—where many consumers follow beauty influencers and engage in real-time reviews—the findings validate that purchase behavior is socially constructed and digitally negotiated.

Interestingly, community engagement emerged as a more nuanced factor. While it positively correlates with buying behavior, its standardized beta was weaker than social presence and peer influence. This could be explained by the nature of community interaction in Gulf social commerce, which is often informal, less structured, and heavily influenced by platform design. Compared to Western or East Asian markets with more formalized digital brand communities, Bahraini consumers may engage less in ongoing discussion threads or co-creation activities and instead rely more on instantaneous feedback, WhatsApp groups, or Instagram Stories. This points to an important cultural distinction in how digital social capital is accumulated and enacted.

Unlike the earlier study which emphasized internal psychological mechanisms (e.g., cognition, affect, hedonism), this study foregrounds external relational mechanisms—namely, how individuals are influenced by others in the online sphere. These findings reinforce the idea that digital buying behavior is less about solitary evaluation and more about shared interpretation, driven by cues from socially embedded platforms. In this way, the research contributes to a sociology of digital consumption, distinct from traditional models of buyer psychology.

7. Conclusion

This paper extends the literature on consumer behavior in the digital age by empirically validating the role of online social experience in shaping buying behavior within Bahrain's beauty and personal care sector. Anchored in theories of social presence, peer influence, and social learning, the study demonstrates that

digitally mediated interactions significantly influence consumer choices, often more so than individual-level attitudes or emotions.

In doing so, the research fills a critical gap in both regional and topical scholarship. Most prior studies have focused on Western markets or on cognitive-affective factors; this paper highlights that in culturally cohesive societies with high digital penetration, social cues and peer dynamics in online environments have powerful behavioral effects.

Importantly, this paper is conceptually and analytically distinct from prior experiential consumer behavior models. While the earlier work focused on offline or hybrid experience attributes (e.g., emotional engagement, cognitive evaluation), this study isolates social commerce-specific variables and their role in digitally constructed influence networks. The divergence in findings—particularly the stronger role of peer and presence over affect or hedonic variables—supports the need to analyze channel-specific behavioral drivers in consumer research.

From a practical perspective, marketers targeting Gulf-based consumers in the beauty sector should invest in social commerce strategies that enhance interactivity, digital visibility, and influencer-based validation. This includes leveraging real-time reviews, personalized content streams, and trust-building signals within platform design.

Future research may build on this foundation by exploring platform-specific effects (e.g., Instagram vs. TikTok), cross-cultural digital behaviors, or the longitudinal evolution of social influence in digital ecosystems.

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