

# Instagram as a Social Commerce Platform: A Study on Customer Perception, Trust and Influencer Impact

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**Abstract:** *The rapid growth of social media has transformed traditional e-commerce into social commerce, with Instagram emerging as a prominent platform for online shopping. However, concerns related to trust, credibility, and transaction safety continue to shape customer perception and purchase behaviour. This study examines customer perception of Instagram as a social commerce platform, with particular emphasis on trust determinants and social influence factors.*

*The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based on primary data collected from 143 Instagram users through a structured questionnaire. Statistical techniques, including percentage analysis, Chi-square test, Friedman test, Two-way ANOVA, and MANOVA, were employed for data analysis.*

*The findings reveal that customer perception towards Instagram shopping is moderate and significantly influenced by factors such as seller credibility, transaction safety, advertisement exposure, and usage behaviour. The results also indicate that excessive exposure to advertisements negatively impacts perceived trust, while users following more business pages tend to exhibit higher trust and transaction confidence. Furthermore, influencer content and algorithm-driven features such as Reels play a crucial role in product discovery and shaping consumer attitudes.*

*The study contributes to social commerce literature by providing empirical evidence from an emerging market context and offers practical insights for enhancing trust, improving user experience, and designing effective marketing strategies.*

**Key Words:** *Social Commerce, Instagram, Customer Perception, Trust, Influencer Marketing.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of commerce, giving rise to social commerce, where social media platforms increasingly integrate commercial activities within their ecosystems (Busalim, 2018; Zhao et al., 2023). Among these platforms, Instagram has emerged as a particularly influential player, largely due to its visually oriented interface, interactive features, and high levels of user engagement (Jin & Ryu, 2020). With the introduction of functionalities such as product tagging, Instagram Shops, influencer collaborations, and in-app purchasing, the platform has evolved beyond a conventional social networking site into a dynamic marketplace that facilitates continuous interaction between consumers and brands (Saprikis & Avlogiaris, 2021).

Despite this rapid evolution, customer perception of Instagram as a shopping platform remains complex and, at times, uncertain. While the platform offers convenience, personalized content, and enhanced product discovery through algorithm-driven recommendations, it simultaneously raises concerns related to trust, authenticity, and transaction security (Ahmad et al., 2025). Unlike traditional e-commerce platforms, Instagram-based commerce often operates through informal sellers, influencer-led promotions, and relatively limited regulatory oversight. As a result, issues such as misleading advertisements, inconsistent product quality, and weak post-purchase support continue to influence user confidence (Mosadegh, 2017).



Trust remains a central concern in social commerce environments, particularly in platforms like Instagram where transactions often occur outside formal regulatory structures. In such settings, users must rely on perceived credibility and platform cues rather than institutional guarantees. As a result, issues related to authenticity, transparency, and reliability become critical in shaping user confidence and influencing their willingness to engage in purchase activities.

Although existing literature on social commerce has extensively explored aspects such as technology adoption, consumer engagement, and purchase intention (Herzallah et al., 2025), much of this work tends to examine these factors in isolation. Moreover, several studies treat social commerce platforms as a homogeneous category, without adequately accounting for the unique features and dynamics of Instagram. In particular, there is limited empirical research that simultaneously integrates trust-related factors, social influence, and user behaviour into a unified framework to explain customer perception, especially in emerging market contexts such as India.

In light of these gaps, the present study seeks to examine customer perception towards Instagram as a social commerce platform, with specific emphasis on trust determinants and social influence factors. By employing empirical analysis based on primary data, the study aims to provide a more integrated understanding of how multiple factors interact to shape user perception and engagement. In doing so, it contributes to the growing literature on social commerce by highlighting the combined role of trust, behavioural patterns, and platform-driven influences. The findings are also expected to offer practical insights for businesses, marketers, and platform developers seeking to strengthen customer trust and enhance the effectiveness of Instagram-based commerce.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social commerce has emerged as a significant extension of traditional e-commerce, where social media platforms facilitate not only interaction but also direct purchasing behaviour. Platforms such as Instagram have fundamentally altered consumer engagement by integrating visual content with commercial functionality, thereby creating a more immersive shopping experience (Busalim, 2018; Zhao et al., 2023). Unlike conventional online marketplaces, Instagram enables users to discover products through images, videos, and interactive features, making the process of product exploration more intuitive and experience-driven.

The design of the platform itself plays a crucial role in shaping user behaviour. Features such as shoppable posts, Stories, and Reels enhance engagement and product visibility (Saprikis & Avlogiaris, 2021). However, this integration of content and commerce also introduces certain complexities. The increasing overlap between entertainment and advertising may make it difficult for users to distinguish between genuine recommendations and promotional content, thereby influencing how product information is interpreted.

Customer perception, in this context, extends beyond product evaluation and is closely linked to the overall platform experience. Factors such as usability, visual appeal, and interaction contribute to how users form attitudes towards products and sellers (Ahmad et al., 2025). At the same time, perception in social commerce environments is not always stable. While visually rich content may create favourable initial impressions, actual purchase experiences may differ depending on factors such as product authenticity and service reliability. This suggests that perception is dynamic and evolves through both pre-purchase expectations and post-purchase outcomes.

Trust, therefore, becomes a central element in social commerce transactions, particularly in environments where direct verification of sellers is limited (Gefen et al., 2003). In the case of Instagram, where many sellers operate informally, the role of trust becomes even more pronounced. Elements such as accurate product representation, customer feedback, and consistent communication contribute to seller credibility (Alam et al., 2022), while transaction safety mechanisms help reduce perceived risk. However, the relationship between trust and platform dynamics is not entirely straightforward. For instance, excessive exposure to advertisements may lead to scepticism, as users may begin to perceive such content as intrusive or misleading.

Closely linked to trust is the role of social influence, which distinguishes social commerce from traditional e-commerce models. Influencers act as intermediaries between brands and consumers, shaping opinions and purchase intentions through curated content (Jin & Ryu, 2020; Zhu et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the influence of such actors is not uniform across users. While some consumers rely heavily on influencer recommendations, others remain cautious, particularly when promotional intent becomes apparent. This indicates that authenticity plays a critical role in determining the effectiveness of influencer marketing. Moreover, recent trends suggest that platform-driven content distribution, such as algorithm-based recommendations, may increasingly shape consumer exposure to products, potentially altering the traditional role of influencers.

User behaviour further adds another layer of complexity to social commerce dynamics. Engagement patterns, including time spent on the platform, frequency of interaction, and the extent of following business accounts, influence how users interpret and respond to commercial content. Higher levels of engagement may enhance familiarity and reduce uncertainty, thereby strengthening trust. However, excessive usage may lead to content fatigue and reduced satisfaction, particularly when users are exposed to a high volume of promotional material. This highlights the dual nature of engagement, where increased interaction can both enhance and undermine user experience.

Although the existing literature provides valuable insights into individual aspects such as trust, social influence, and technology adoption, these elements are often examined in isolation. There remains limited empirical research that integrates these factors into a unified framework to explain customer perception, particularly in the context of Instagram. Furthermore, evidence from emerging markets such as India is relatively limited, despite the rapid growth of social commerce in these regions.

In this context, there is a clear need for a more comprehensive approach that examines how trust-related factors, social influence, and user behaviour collectively shape customer perception in Instagram-based social commerce. The present study attempts to address this gap by providing an integrated empirical analysis based on primary data.

### **3. OBJECTIVES**

- To examine how customers perceive Instagram as a social commerce platform.
- To analyse the determinants of customer trust in Instagram-based social commerce.
- To investigate the influence of influencers and advertisements on customer perception.
- To evaluate the impact of usage behaviour and platform engagement on customer perception.

### **4. RESEARCH METHOD**

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine customer perception and trust in Instagram-based social commerce. The analysis is based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to active Instagram users.

The target population comprises individuals who engage with business accounts, influencers, or shopping-related content on Instagram. A total of 143 valid responses were obtained using a convenience sampling approach. The sample primarily represents young and active users, which is consistent with the dominant demographic profile of Instagram usage.

The questionnaire was designed to capture information related to demographic characteristics, platform usage behaviour, trust-related factors such as seller credibility and transaction safety, and overall perception of Instagram-based shopping. Most variables were measured using Likert-type scales, allowing respondents to indicate their level of agreement with specific statements.

For the purpose of analysis, a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques was employed. Percentage analysis was used to summarise demographic and usage characteristics. The Chi-square test was applied to examine associations between categorical variables, while the Friedman test was used to analyse differences in ranked preferences related to product discovery sources. Two-way ANOVA and Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) were employed to assess variations across user groups and to evaluate the combined effect of multiple independent variables on customer perception. The selection of these techniques was guided by the nature of the data and the objectives of the study.

While the study provides useful insights into customer perception in Instagram-based commerce, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The use of convenience sampling may restrict the generalisability of the findings. In addition, the reliance on self-reported responses may introduce response bias. Despite these limitations, the study offers a meaningful empirical basis for understanding user behaviour in social commerce environments.

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	37	25.9
	Female	106	74.1
Age	Below 18	24	16.8
	18–25	60	42.0
	26–35	35	24.5
Occupation	36–45	24	16.8
	Student	53	37.1
	Employee	42	29.4
Income	Business	28	19.6
	Homemaker	20	14.0
	Below ₹10,000	59	41.3
	₹10,001–25,000	30	21.0
₹25,001–50,000	32	22.4	
Above ₹50,000	22	15.4	

Source: Primary Data

The demographic distribution indicates that the sample is predominantly composed of female respondents (74.1%) and individuals in the 18–25 age group (42.0%). A substantial proportion of respondents are students (37.1%) and belong to lower-income categories. This suggests that the sample largely reflects young and digitally active users, who represent a key segment of Instagram users.

### 5.2 Instagram Usage Behaviour

Table 2: Instagram Usage Profile

Variable	Category	Percentage
Purchase via Instagram	Most of the time	65.0
	Occasionally	35.0
Time spent	< 3 hours	85.3
	3–7 hours	6.3
	8–13 hours	8.4
Follow business pages	Yes	45.5
	No	54.5
Ad exposure	Frequently	49.7
	Very frequently	14.7
Purchase frequency	< 3 times	69.2

Source: Primary Data

The results indicate that a majority of respondents engage in purchasing activities through Instagram, although the frequency of purchases remains relatively low, with most respondents reporting fewer than three purchases. The distribution of time spent shows that a large proportion of users spend less than three hours daily on the platform. At the same time, a considerable number of users report frequent exposure to advertisements, highlighting the platform's strong commercial orientation.



### 5.3 Association Between Engagement and Purchase Behaviour

**Table 3: Chi-Square Test Results**

Variable	Chi-Square	df	p-value
Business pages followed vs Purchase activity	54.839	4	<0.01

*Source: Primary Data*

As presented in Table 3, the Chi-square test reveals a statistically significant association between the number of business pages followed and purchase activity ( $\chi^2 = 54.839$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This indicates that engagement with business-related content is significantly related to users' purchasing behaviour on Instagram.

### 5.4 Product Discovery Sources

**Table 4: Friedman Test Results**

Source	Mean Rank	Rank
Explore/Reels	3.93	1
Sponsored Ads	3.33	2
Product Tags	2.68	3
Friends	2.66	4
Influencers	2.40	5
Statistic	Value	
Chi-Square	94.298	
df	4	
p-value	<0.01	

*Source: Primary Data*

The results of the Friedman test indicate a statistically significant difference in the importance of product discovery sources ( $\chi^2 = 94.298$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Among the various sources, Explore/Reels rank highest, followed by sponsored advertisements, while influencer-based discovery shows relatively lower ranking.

### 5.5 Customer Perception of Instagram Shopping

**Table 5: MANOVA Results (Summary)**

Variable	F-value	p-value
Gender	9.604	<0.01
Monthly Income	3.197	<0.05
Time Spent	35.998	<0.01

*Source: Primary Data*

The MANOVA results indicate that customer perception varies significantly across demographic and behavioural factors. In particular, gender ( $F = 9.604$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), monthly income ( $F = 3.197$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and time spent on Instagram ( $F = 35.998$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) show statistically significant differences in perception levels.

### 5.6 Trust and Its Determinants

**Table 6: ANOVA Results**

Factor	Variable	F-value	p-value
Seller Credibility	Business pages followed	3.505	<0.05
Seller Credibility	Ad exposure	35.249	<0.01
Transaction Safety	Business pages followed	8.470	<0.01
Transaction Safety	Purchase behaviour	Not significant	>0.05

*Source: Primary Data*

The ANOVA results show that trust-related factors, including seller credibility and transaction safety, vary significantly across certain user characteristics. Seller credibility is significantly influenced by both the number of business pages followed ( $F = 3.505, p < 0.05$ ) and advertisement exposure ( $F = 35.249, p < 0.01$ ). Similarly, transaction safety varies significantly with the number of business pages followed ( $F = 8.470, p < 0.01$ ), while no significant relationship is observed with purchase behaviour.

## 6. DISCUSSION

### • Customer Behaviour and Platform Usage

The findings indicate that Instagram is widely adopted as a social commerce platform, particularly among younger users. However, the relatively low frequency of purchases suggests that the platform is primarily used for exploratory or low-involvement transactions rather than high-value purchases. This pattern reflects the evolving nature of social commerce, where browsing, content consumption, and engagement often precede actual purchasing decisions. It also suggests that Instagram functions not only as a transactional platform but as a discovery-oriented environment that shapes consumer interest over time.

### • Role of Engagement in Driving Purchases

The significant relationship between the number of business pages followed and purchase activity highlights the importance of engagement in social commerce environments. Users who actively follow business accounts are exposed to a higher volume of product-related content, which may increase familiarity and reduce perceived risk. A possible explanation is that repeated exposure enhances cognitive availability and trust, thereby facilitating purchase decisions. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing the role of interaction and content exposure in influencing consumer behaviour (Zhao et al., 2023), and reinforces the idea that engagement acts as a key mechanism linking platform usage with purchasing outcomes.

### • Changing Nature of Product Discovery

One of the more notable findings of the study is the dominance of algorithm-driven features such as Explore and Reels in product discovery. While earlier studies have emphasized the influence of social media influencers (Jin & Ryu, 2020), the present results suggest a shift towards platform-driven content distribution. A possible explanation is the increasing sophistication of recommendation algorithms, which tailor content based on user preferences and behaviour.

This indicates that visibility is no longer solely determined by influencer credibility, but also by algorithmic prioritisation. As a result, platform mechanisms are becoming central in shaping consumer exposure and decision-making, signalling a transformation in the traditional dynamics of social influence within digital commerce environments.

### • Customer Perception and Usage Intensity

The results demonstrate that customer perception is significantly influenced by usage behaviour, particularly time spent on the platform. Interestingly, users with lower levels of usage report more favourable experiences compared to heavy users. This may be explained by the phenomenon of content fatigue, where prolonged exposure to repetitive or promotional content reduces perceived value and satisfaction.

In this context, excessive engagement may lead to diminishing returns, as increased exposure does not necessarily translate into improved perception. Instead, it may create cognitive overload and reduce user satisfaction, highlighting the importance of balanced platform usage.

### • Trust as a Critical Determinant

Trust emerges as a central factor influencing customer perception in Instagram-based commerce. Seller credibility and transaction safety play a significant role in shaping user confidence, particularly in an environment where direct verification of sellers is limited. However, the findings also reveal that advertisement exposure has a dual effect on trust.

While moderate exposure may enhance awareness and credibility, excessive exposure appears to reduce trust. This may be explained by the persuasive overload effect, where users become increasingly sceptical of promotional content when it is perceived as excessive or intrusive. This observation is consistent with existing literature on online trust (Gefen et al., 2003; Alam et al., 2022) and highlights the need for a balanced approach to marketing communication in social commerce platforms.

- Implications of Social Influence

The findings suggest that both influencers and advertisements contribute to shaping customer perception, but their effectiveness depends largely on perceived authenticity. While influencer marketing continues to play an important role, its impact appears to be moderated by platform-driven content exposure. In other words, the influence of individual actors is increasingly intertwined with algorithmic visibility.

This indicates a shift in the nature of social influence, where platform design and content distribution mechanisms play a more central role than previously observed. As a result, understanding consumer behaviour in social commerce requires considering not only interpersonal influence but also the structural and technological features of the platform.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The present study examined customer perception towards Instagram as a social commerce platform, with particular emphasis on trust, social influence, and user behaviour. The findings indicate that Instagram has established itself as an important channel for online shopping, particularly among young and digitally active users. However, the relatively low frequency and value of transactions suggest that the platform continues to function more as a discovery-oriented environment rather than a fully developed commerce ecosystem.

The results demonstrate that customer perception is shaped by a combination of interrelated factors. Trust-related elements, particularly seller credibility and transaction safety, play a central role in influencing user confidence. At the same time, behavioural aspects such as engagement with business accounts and usage intensity significantly affect how users evaluate their experience on the platform. The findings further indicate that excessive exposure to advertisements may undermine trust, highlighting the importance of maintaining a balance between visibility and credibility in social commerce environments.

An important contribution of the study lies in identifying the growing dominance of algorithm-driven features such as Explore and Reels in product discovery. This suggests a shift from traditional influencer-centric models towards platform-driven content visibility, where algorithmic recommendations increasingly shape consumer exposure and decision-making. In this sense, the study extends existing understanding of social commerce by emphasising the role of platform mechanisms alongside interpersonal influence.

Taken together, the findings show that customer perception in Instagram-based commerce emerges from the interaction of trust, social influence, and user behaviour within a technology-driven environment. Recognising how these elements interact is essential for understanding the evolving nature of social commerce, where the boundaries between content, interaction, and transaction continue to become increasingly fluid.

## 8. SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research can extend the study by incorporating larger and more diverse samples to improve generalizability. Comparative studies across different social commerce platforms can also provide deeper insights into platform-specific dynamics. Further research may explore the role of cultural and psychological factors in shaping customer perception. Additionally, qualitative approaches such as interviews or case studies can be used to gain a more detailed understanding of user experiences. The impact of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and personalized recommendation systems, on social commerce behaviour also offers a promising area for future investigation.

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