

Social Commerce and SME Competitiveness in the Fashion Industry: Insights from an Emerging Market

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Abstract: This paper examines how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in an emerging market context convert social commerce engagement into competitive performance. While social commerce is often framed as a democratizing force that lowers market entry barriers for small businesses, its actual impact on business competitiveness remains uneven. Using empirical data from 201 SME owners actively operating on TikTok Shop and Instagram Shop, this study investigates the role of internal structural readiness, specifically transactive memory systems, task specialization, and coordination in shaping performance outcomes. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyze the relationship between digital engagement and competitive advantage. The results show that social commerce investment alone does not significantly enhance market penetration or sales performance unless supported by internal mechanisms that allow SMEs to manage digital complexity collectively. These findings shift the conversation from adoption-centric models toward organizational capacity and knowledge integration as key enablers of digital competitiveness. By extending the Resource-Advantage Theory of Competition, this study highlights how internal knowledge structures and team adaptability determine the extent to which digital resources can be transformed into market value. The paper contributes to the growing literature on digital transformation among SMEs by offering a structural perspective on performance readiness in the social commerce domain. It also offers managerial implications for SMEs seeking to strengthen internal capabilities, as well as for platform providers and policymakers aiming to build more inclusive digital ecosystems in emerging economies. In doing so, this research addresses both theoretical and practical gaps in understanding the micro-foundations of SME competitiveness in knowledge-driven digital markets.

Keywords: social commerce; SMEs; fashion industry; transactive memory system; emerging markets.

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Introduction

In 2024, Indonesia recorded approximately 160 million active social media users (Abdillah et al., 2024), with an average daily usage time of three hours (Zhang et al., 2024). These figures illustrate the strategic role of social media platforms in Indonesia. The sheer number of users combined with prolonged usage duration has transformed social media from a mere source of entertainment into a powerful tool for mass mobilization (Jin, 2024). Its attractive nature makes it highly popular, offering diverse content ranging from short videos and images to personal stories (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Features such as notifications, comments, likes, and live streaming enhance the platform's liveliness and interactivity (Tian & Frank, 2024). The fashion subsector stands as the largest contributor to the nation's creative economy, accounting for 61.5% of its total output (Prameswari et al., 2023). The sector is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which form the backbone of the economy, with 64.2 million business units employing 119.6 million workers nationwide, representing 96.92% of the national workforce (Smesco, 2023). Within this landscape, the apparel industry represents one of the most vibrant and competitive SME clusters in the creative economy. The rise of social commerce platforms has further amplified its economic influence; transactions in the fashion category account

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for approximately 39% of total social commerce sales, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping the country's digital retail growth. (Adibah & Sufiati, 2024).

These characteristics have positioned social media at the center of today's digital economy landscape (Zhang et al., 2023). As platforms that prioritize engagement and connection (Voorveld et al., 2018), social media have evolved into commercial spaces that integrate social interaction, entertainment, and transactions simultaneously (Dwivedi et al., 2023). This transformation is marked by the growing prevalence of live selling, influencer endorsements, and the rise of user-generated content directly linked to commercial products (Alam et al., 2022). Such developments allow consumers to obtain product recommendations from influencers, who are perceived as more credible and trustworthy than anonymous reviews on e-commerce platforms (Janssen et al., 2022). Direct interaction with sellers fosters a sense of closeness and transparency, ultimately influencing perceptions of product authenticity and fostering customer loyalty (Kanani & Glavee-Geo, 2021). Uniquely crafted visual content, particularly video testimonials, has been shown to capture attention and trigger impulsive purchasing behavior (Juanim et al., 2024). In this context, social commerce offers a dynamic, real-time, and emotionally engaging shopping experience that conventional e-commerce cannot provide (Huang & Mohamad, 2025).

For business actors, this transformation represents an opportunity to improve business performance and market penetration (Asanprakit & Kraiwanit, 2023). To leverage this opportunity, businesses are required to produce high-quality promotional videos, aesthetically appealing product photos, and visual storytelling content, all of which must be consistently published to attract audience attention (Szakal et al., 2024). Moreover, they need to invest in professional content creators to produce visually and narratively compelling content that aligns with social media trends (Grover et al., 2025). Collaboration with influencers, proven to enhance market trust and generate immediate consumer responses, has also become essential (Barta et al., 2023). Finally, human capital development is critical, as operating within social commerce demands creativity and the ability to manage real-time customer engagement effectively (Maia et al., 2018).

All these forms of investment are interdependent and dynamic: the success of one aspect is highly contingent upon the support of others, and all must continuously adapt to evolving trends. However, these investment characteristics are not entirely aligned with the realities faced by SMEs. Such requirements demand that SMEs not only possess resources but also the capability to maintain consistency and flexibility over the long term. This poses a significant challenge as SMEs often operate under tight financial constraints, limiting their ability to collaborate with influencers who command wide-reaching audiences and high credibility (Agustian et al., 2023). These limitations not only restrict promotional reach but also diminish the opportunity for SMEs to build strong brand images through credible endorsements (Yuniarti, 2024). Furthermore, the risks associated with such investments cannot be overlooked. Social commerce trends are highly volatile, rendering today's effective strategies potentially obsolete tomorrow (Wang et al., 2022). SMEs unable to adapt swiftly risk incurring financial losses on promotional expenditures, especially when content or campaigns fail to generate the expected market exposure and response (Rochmatullah et al., 2022). In addition, SMEs often face mental stress and operational fatigue, particularly when businesses are managed by only two or three individuals who must simultaneously function as producers, marketers, and social commerce managers. When time and energy are insufficient to keep pace with the fast-evolving digital content landscape, their strategies cannot be executed effectively (Gunawan, 2024).

The majority of previous studies have predominantly focused on the potential of social commerce from the perspectives of marketing effectiveness (Busalim et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2021), consumer behavior (Mou & Benyoucef, 2021; Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016), or technology adoption in general (Abed, 2020; Lina & Suwarni, 2022). Although prior research has extensively examined adoption patterns and user engagement, few studies have critically investigated the internal structural challenges that SMEs face in translating

social commerce investments into competitive outcomes, particularly within the volatile and fast-paced environment of short-video-based platforms. This study seeks to address this critical gap by asserting that success in social commerce is not merely a function of technological adoption, but also of internal resource readiness and the organizational capacity to manage dynamic, content-driven ecosystems. To anchor this argument, the study draws upon the Resource-Advantage Theory of Competition (Hunt, 1995), which offers a relevant framework for understanding how firms can identify, configure, and adapt their resources to overcome structural limitations and enhance market performance (Hunt & Morgan, 2005).

Literature review and hypotheses development

The Resource-Advantage Theory of Competition (RAToC)

This theory posits that resources among business actors are inherently heterogeneous, meaning that not all enterprises possess the same types, quality, or combinations of resources (Hunt, 1995, 1997). Due to these variations, business strategies are never entirely identical or universally comparable. Some firms establish strategic partnerships with business allies as part of their efforts to expand market reach (Oh, 2018). Others focus on leveraging information to enhance performance and strengthen organizational learning as a means of developing internal capacity (Zhang & Yu, 2020). The interaction between collaboration and information utilization drives innovation, which serves as a fundamental source of competitive advantage. This synergy enables firms to capture market opportunities more effectively (Gupta et al., 2016). In addition, the uniqueness of raw materials owned by a company contributes to business growth and performance in competitive markets (Yang & Aumeboonsuke, 2022).

Tangible resources such as infrastructure and equipment are essential for supporting operational efficiency and effectiveness (Juárez-Luis et al., 2019), while human resource competencies play a critical role in enhancing productivity (Situmorang et al., 2024). Moreover, a firm's ability to absorb and integrate technology is a crucial aspect of resource management, particularly in responding to rapidly changing market dynamics (Mahendra et al., 2025). In other words, competitive advantage is not always achieved through price reductions or discounts, but rather through the firm's ability to leverage and combine unique resources to create value (Sujarwo et al., 2022).

Social commerce and pro-growth penetration strategy

Social Commerce Investment refers to the efforts of business actors to allocate resources toward social media-based marketing activities aimed at strengthening market position and consumer engagement (Grover et al., 2025). This encompasses various forms of investment, including the development of content designed to entertain and provide an enjoyable experience for users (Moghddam et al., 2024). Active interaction between viewers and streamers enhances psychological closeness, trust (Aref, 2024), and perceived usefulness (Moghddam et al., 2024). The credibility and accuracy of information further foster user trust and positively influence purchase intentions (Huwaida et al., 2024), while ease of use encourages repeat purchases (Guo & Li, 2022), increases platform usage frequency, and strengthens users' willingness to recommend the platform to others (Guo & Li, 2022), increases platform usage frequency, and strengthens users' willingness to recommend the platform to others (Qu et al., 2023).

Ease of use not only shapes attitudes toward the platform but also increases the likelihood of impulsive purchasing behavior (Xiang et al., 2022). Moreover, the dynamics within social commerce communities foster user engagement (Busalim et al., 2023) and facilitate decision-making processes (Islam & Sheikh, 2024). Thus, investment in social media serves as a strategic avenue for business growth through market penetration strategies, primarily by expanding reach and attracting new consumers (Dincer & Dincer, 2023). Based on these, it is presumed that:

H1: Social Commerce Investment positively affects Pro-Growth Penetration Strategy.

Transactive memory system, pro-growth penetration strategy and sales network power

The Transactive Memory System (TMS) refers to a team-based knowledge structure in which members collectively share, store, and rely on each other's expertise (Liu et al., 2019). This system develops through an initial recognition of individual expertise, followed by testing and verification of capabilities, ultimately evolving into a structured knowledge-sharing framework (Liu et al., 2019). TMS enhances decision-making efficiency as information can be readily obtained from the most reliable sources within the team (Yao & Wang, 2024). The system also improves team agility, as knowledge specialization enables sales teams to tailor their approaches precisely to meet the diverse and complex needs of clients (Shahzad et al., 2022). Furthermore, coordination within the system facilitates team adaptation to change and uncertainty, ensuring work continuity and performance stability (Feng & Madni, 2024). Communication is a critical factor that allows teams to manage relationships effectively while enhancing the ability to build connections and expand networks within and beyond the organization (Nawata et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, the distribution of knowledge fosters innovation (Cabeza-Pullés et al., 2018), which becomes a strategic advantage for sales teams, strengthening their bargaining power in mutually beneficial exchanges (González-Mohíno et al., 2025). Such innovation also reflects cross-functional collaboration, where integrated knowledge and capabilities accelerate product distribution and reinforce market penetration (Aggarwal et al., 2023). Moreover, credibility enhances network connectivity by fostering more targeted interactions, which in turn strengthens market control (Wang et al., 2018). Thus, the Transactive Memory System forms the foundation for the development of collective knowledge that reinforces sales networks and drives sustainable market growth (Cetin, 2019). Based on these, it is presumed that:

H2: The Transactive Memory System positively affects the Pro-Growth Penetration Strategy.

H3: The Transactive Memory System positively affects Sales Network Power.

Pro-growth penetration strategy, sales performance and sales network power

The Pro Growth Penetration Strategy refers to an approach aimed at entering and expanding market share by emphasizing sales growth (Umniyyatul & Aprianingsih, 2023). Market penetration is often initiated through discount offerings that enhance perceived product value and encourage repeat purchases (Goeyardi et al., 2022), while low-pricing strategies play a crucial role in increasing sales volume and attracting new customers (Ekankumo & Thankgod, 2024). Price and promotion are key factors in penetration strategies that contribute to market share expansion (Gikunda et al., 2023). Market penetration is not merely about geographical expansion but also the result of strategic distribution efforts, which reduce inventory costs and strengthen business networks (Han et al., 2013).

In the B2B context, innovative products are more likely to attract business partners as they offer superior functionality, efficiency, and ease of use (Rodrigues et al., 2012). Product development and adaptation shape perceptions of quality and differentiation, fostering customer loyalty and sales growth (Ade et al., 2025). Effective market penetration requires synergy between product, price, and promotion strategies, while business performance growth is reflected through increased sales, market share expansion, cost efficiency, and profitability (Bukoye & Muritala, 2023). This approach enables companies to build and sustainably develop sales amidst the competitive and ever-changing market landscape (Xue et al., 2019). Based on these, it is presumed that:

H4: Pro-Growth Penetration Strategy positively affects Sales Network Power.

H5: Pro-Growth Penetration Strategy positively affects Sales Performance.

Sales network power and sales performance

Sales Network Power refers to a firm's capability to reach, manage, and optimize its sales network effectively (Ferdinand & Zuhroh, 2022). This includes the extent to which the company can ensure that products are distributed quickly, efficiently, and accurately to end consumers (Wang & Robinson, 2023). In a business context, sales network power is not merely defined by the existence of a network, but rather by the quality of relationships, the effectiveness of communication, and the ability to create shared value within the distribution chain (Ramos et al., 2019). This capability enables products to enter previously hard-to-reach markets, significantly expanding market coverage and increasing transaction opportunities (Parida et al., 2016).

Sales network power is considered an external asset, consisting of customers and strategic partners who possess the ability to access broader consumer segments and foster mutually beneficial collaborations (Ferdinand & Killa, 2018). Furthermore, a strong network, including through social media, enhances access to market information and customer needs (Muna et al., 2023). Such networks also facilitate collaboration and knowledge exchange, thereby strengthening competitiveness and brand positioning in the marketplace (Abeson & Taku, 2007). In other words, sales performance is not solely determined by the individual competence of salespeople but also by how effectively they are connected and collaborate with various stakeholders (Gonzalez et al., 2009). Based on these, it is presumed that:

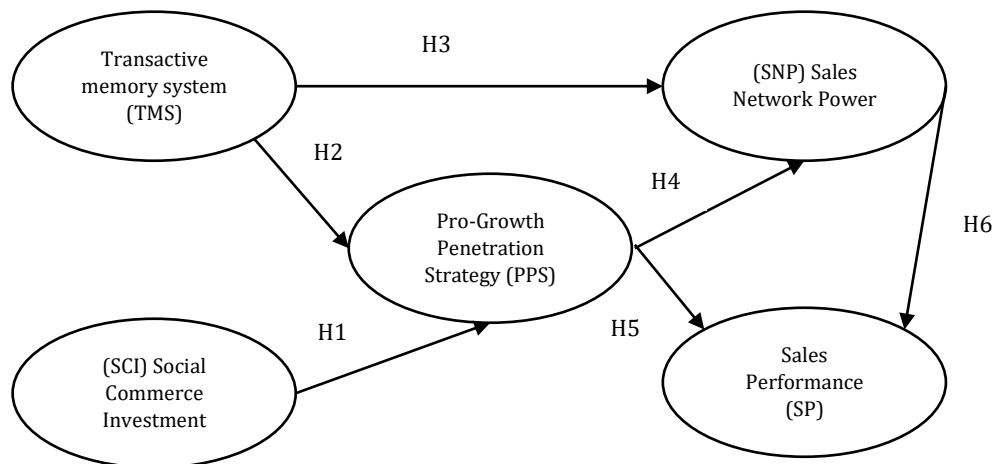
H6: Sales Network Power positively affects Sales Performance.

Based on the aforementioned considerations, Table 1 illustrates the key characteristics of e-commerce and social commerce which should be taken into account by a thorough examination of the proposed relationships. Further, Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model to be analyzed.

Table 1. Key characteristics of e-commerce and social commerce

Aspect	e-Commerce	S-Commerce
Promotion System	Centralized by the platform	Handled by sellers, content-based and driven by affiliates/influencers
Promotion Cost	Often shared with the platform	Fully borne by sellers (endorsement fees, content production, advertising)
Influencer Requirement	Not mandatory	Often, a key success factor (live streaming, product reviews, affiliate marketing)
Type of Promotional Content	Images, product descriptions, and text-based promotions	Short videos, live streaming, and real-time interaction
Consumer Engagement	Passive, more transactional	Active, emotional, driven by relationships and entertainment
Time & HR Investment	Relatively low, manageable by individuals	High requires a dedicated team for content, live sessions, and customer engagement
Promotion Scalability	Limited by the search algorithm	High if the content goes viral or receives algorithmic support from the platform
Sales System	Static relies on consumer search	Dynamic, can happen instantly during content exposure

Source: Kim & Park (2013), Li et al. (2001)

**Figure 1. Conceptual framework**

Source: own processing

Methodology

This study used a quantitative approach, and the respondents were fashion SME owners or managers in Indonesia who played a key role in business decision-making and had active shops on social commerce platforms such as TikTok Shop or Instagram Shop. Data were collected between September and December 2024 through an online questionnaire distributed via professional SME networks, fashion business communities, and targeted social media groups.

The questionnaire items employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The selection of respondents used a purposive sampling technique to ensure relevance to the research objectives. (Ahmed, 2024). Inclusion criteria required that SMEs: (1) operate in the fashion subsector; (2) maintain consistent online activity on TikTok Shop or Instagram Shop for at least the past six months; and (3) record measurable online sales engagement during that period.

Additional screening captured firm characteristics, showing that most had been operating for 5–6 years with an average of 6–10 employees. In terms of business presence, the majority of respondents operated both online and offline. A smaller proportion operated exclusively online. A total of 218 responses were received, and after screening for completeness and eligibility, 201 valid cases were retained. The minimum sample size requirement was determined using the sample-to-item ratio approach. (Memon et al., 2020). Data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS version 3.0.

Empirical results

Demographics results

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of fashion entrepreneurs engaged in social commerce in our sample are female, accounting for 68.16% of the respondents. This result aligns with the characteristics commonly attributed to Indonesian women, who are known for their meticulousness, attention to detail, and strong inclination to nurture and maintain social relationships (Larasatie & Ulifah, 2023). Such characteristics serve as valuable assets in the fashion industry, which demands precision in product presentation, consistency in brand building, and active engagement within communities. Moreover, women are considered more adaptive in keeping up with fashion trends, making them better prepared to navigate the dynamics of social commerce platforms (Vassalo et al., 2024). Regardless of gender, the majority of business owners hold a Bachelor's degree, representing 60.70% of the sample. This educational background enhances their

analytical ability to identify business opportunities and challenges, and it is strongly associated with the level of digital literacy required to manage social commerce businesses effectively (Reddy et al., 2023).

In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents fall within the 27–32 years age group (45.77%) and the 33–38 years age group (39.30%), which are considered productive age categories. At this stage, entrepreneurs tend to be more stable and cautious in making business decisions. The combination of professional experience and emotional maturity makes this group better equipped to invest in social commerce (Hanafizadeh et al., 2021). Furthermore, 44.33% of the respondents utilise both Instagram Shop and TikTok Shop simultaneously, indicating a strategic effort to reach a broader and more diverse market. The use of multiple platforms reflects an adaptive approach to the distinct characteristics of each platform, thereby optimising sales performance (Ma et al., 2023).

Inner and outer model

The measurement model assessment confirms that the research instruments demonstrate satisfactory validity and reliability. As shown in Table 2, all item loadings exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, while the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are above 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity (Hair et al., 2020).

Table 2. Convergent validity and reliability results

Constructs	Loadings	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
<i>Social commerce Investment</i> (ElAydi, 2018)		0.737	0.882	0.918
SCI1: We create and maintain an online community around our fashion brand.	0.824			
SCI2: We often share photos or videos of our fashion products on social media.	0.890			
SCI3: We collaborate with influencers to improve the credibility of our brand.	0.894			
<i>Pro-Growth Penetration Strategy</i> (Goeyardi et al., 2022; Umniyyatul & Aprianingsih, 2023)		0.619	0.729	0.866
PPS1: We offer competitive pricing strategies to attract new customers.	0.849			
PPS2: We develop new product variants to meet customer needs.	0.722			
PPS3: We optimize distribution channels to reach wider audiences.	0.720			
PPS4: We promote our fashion brand consistently through online marketing channels.	0.845			
<i>Sales performance</i> (Komunda et al., 2023; Shapiro & Gómez, 2014)		0.614	0.701	0.714
SP1: The number of units sold has increased.	0.800			
SP2: Our sales revenue keeps growing.	0.751			
SP3: More customers choose our products over competitors.	0.799			
<i>Transactive memory system</i> (Nawata et al., 2020)		0.622	0.713	0.739
TMS1: Our team knows who has expertise in specific areas.	0.806			
TMS2: We share a clear understanding of who is responsible for which tasks.	0.830			
TMS3: Team members know whom to ask when they need support or information.	0.726			
<i>Sales network power</i> (Ferdinand & Zuhroh, 2022)		0.621	0.699	0.767
SNP1: We are always good at the speed of delivery to our customers.	0.709			
SNP2: We are more attractive to our business partners in our business network.	0.890			
SNP3: We are both dependent on the other to be successful.	0.754			

Source: own processing

Furthermore, Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values for all constructs surpass 0.70, confirming strong internal consistency (Sarstedt et al., 2022). Discriminant validity, tested using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, reveals that the square roots of AVE for each construct are greater than their correlations with other constructs (Table 3). This provides empirical evidence that all constructs are distinct and conceptually independent from one another (Henseler et al., 2016). Additionally, the collinearity assessment in Table 4 shows that all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values fall between 1.006 and 1.044, which is well below the recommended threshold of 5. These results indicate that multicollinearity is not a concern within the structural model, ensuring that the estimated path coefficients remain unbiased (Magno et al., 2024).

Table 3. Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker)

Constructs	PPS	SNP	SP	SCI	TMS
PPS	0.787	-	-	-	-
SNP	0.204	0.788	-	-	-
SP	0.255	0.157	0.784	-	-
SCI	0.140	0.190	0.047	0.858	-
TMS	0.191	0.188	0.149	0.082	0.786

Source: own processing

Table 4. Collinearity results

Path	VIF
Pro growth penetration strategy → Sales network power	1.038
Pro growth penetration strategy → Sales performance	1.044
Sales network power → Sales performance	1.040
Social commerce investment → Pro growth penetration strategy	1.006
Transactive memory system → Pro growth penetration strategy	1.007
Transactive memory system → Sales network power	1.035

Source: own processing

In addition, the structural model evaluation considers the R^2 values to assess the model's explanatory power. As shown in Table 5, the R^2 values for Sales Network Power (0.365), Sales Performance (0.477), and Pro Growth Penetration Strategy (0.342) reflect moderate explanatory power (Hair et al., 2011). These findings indicate that the exogenous variables adequately explain the variance in the endogenous constructs, supporting the model's predictive relevance (Nguyen et al., 2024).

Table 5. Path coefficients

Path	Path coefficient	T-Statistics	P-Values	R^2
Pro growth penetration strategy → Sales network power	0.175	2.350	0.019	0.465
Transactive memory system → Sales network power	0.155	1.977	0.040	0.465
Sales network power → Sales performance	0.110	1.429	0.154	0.377
Pro growth penetration strategy → Sales performance	0.233	3.492	0.001	0.377
Transactive memory system → Pro growth penetration strategy	0.180	2.462	0.014	0.342
Social commerce investment → Pro growth penetration strategy	0.125	1.771	0.077	0.342

Source: own processing

Discussions

When resources alone are not enough

The findings indicate that Social Commerce Investment does not have a significant effect on Pro-Growth Penetration Strategy, thus H1 is not supported. This finding implies that having a broad or influential sales network does not necessarily guarantee better sales outcomes in social commerce. In other words, although all fashion SMEs may have equal

access to platforms such as TikTok or Instagram Shop, not all possess the necessary resource combinations to leverage these platforms effectively. One of the most critical resources is the ability to build and maintain relationships with consumers. For many SMEs, this remains a major challenge, as not all business owners have the time or commitment to engage intensively with their customer base. Without consistent interaction, brand-consumer relationships weaken, communities become passive, and their function as a promotional force diminishes. Consequently, consumer engagement declines, loyalty erodes, and the effectiveness of promotional efforts aimed at market penetration deteriorates. Moreover, social commerce heavily relies on the entrepreneur's creativity in producing authentic product photos, short videos, and live-streaming sessions. This presents additional challenges, as not all SMEs possess the technical skills or access to the necessary equipment and software to produce high-quality visual content. As a result, their content becomes scarce or substandard, limiting product visibility on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram Shop, narrowing distribution reach, and reducing market penetration opportunities. Furthermore, collaboration with influencers has become a crucial factor in building consumer trust. Influencers serve as opinion leaders who shape consumer perceptions and preferences through their online presence.

Evidence shows that consumers tend to trust recommendations from familiar or admired individuals more than conventional advertising. However, many SMEs lack the financial resources to engage influencers with significant follower bases. This challenge is even more pronounced for SMEs located in smaller cities or regions with an underdeveloped influencer ecosystem, making it difficult to find relevant influencers who align with their products. Consequently, even innovative products often fail to reach potential consumers effectively. Additionally, the use of influencers in social commerce strategies can significantly affect pricing structures. Collaborations with popular influencers often involve substantial costs, forcing SMEs to raise product prices to cover these expenses. Unfortunately, such price increases can diminish product competitiveness, especially against more established SMEs that already enjoy greater recognition on social commerce platforms.

Similarly, Sales Network Power shows no significant influence on Sales Performance, indicating that H6 is not supported. This situation can be observed in the sales network power developed by fashion SMEs on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. One of the key factors contributing to the weakness of these networks is that the fashion products offered are often insufficiently attractive to larger or more established business partners. Due to their limited product variety, SMEs tend to engage with partners operating at an equal or even lower business level, such as small retail stores or home-based outlets. These partners typically face significant market access limitations, restricting their ability to distribute products across diverse consumer segments independently. Consequently, they become highly dependent on the SMEs, particularly for the provision of digital content and promotional materials. As a result, the sales networks established tend to offer little contribution to revenue growth. Rather than being built on mutually beneficial, performance-driven relationships, these networks are predominantly formed based on social proximity or community ties. This dynamic restricts product recognition to within these social circles, limiting the ability to reach broader consumer markets and thereby constraining sales potential. Consequently, the number of products sold remains stagnant.

At the same time, limited production capacity prevents SMEs from fulfilling market demand consistently. Moreover, the informal nature of employment within these businesses often results in low worker commitment and irregular attendance, further reducing productivity. These combined factors directly impede the speed and efficiency of product distribution. Product shortages frequently occur, prompting consumers to switch to alternatives that are more easily accessible. In addition, the persistent lack of product availability contributes to negative consumer perceptions, with SME products increasingly seen as unreliable in fulfilling market needs.

Leveraging internal resources for competitive advantage

The empirical findings support H2 and H3, indicating that internal resources within SMEs, such as collaboration, specialization, and task division, significantly influence both pro-growth penetration strategies and sales network power. In Indonesia, SMEs are typically managed by a small number of individuals, often involving family members in daily operations. This lean structure facilitates fluid communication, efficient coordination, and rapid decision-making without bureaucratic constraints. Clear task division also enhances management effectiveness, with each member responsible for specific functions, such as production, marketing, or customer service. This creates an impression of professionalism that attracts resellers, both online and offline.

For resellers, product selection is not based solely on quality but also on the producer's ability to ensure stable business support. A well-structured SME offers reliable product availability and market responsiveness, providing resellers with greater confidence. Moreover, clear internal roles facilitate collaboration, creating mutually beneficial relationships. SMEs gain additional marketing support without excessive advertising costs, while resellers receive ready-to-sell products, marketing materials, and reliable supply chains. Although many SMEs actively promote their products through TikTok and Instagram, physical stores remain an essential element of their growth strategy. In regions with limited internet access or among consumers who prefer in-person purchases, offline resellers play a vital role. These resellers bridge the gap between digital marketing and direct consumer access, allowing SMEs to combine online brand awareness with offline market expansion.

The lean and flexible structure of SMEs also contributes to maintaining competitive pricing and developing new product variants. Many SME owners take on multiple roles, reducing operational costs and keeping prices affordable. This structure also facilitates rapid information exchange, allowing SMEs to respond quickly to market trends and consumer feedback. Consequently, SMEs can develop relevant product innovations without the complexity typically found in larger corporations. Effective information flow within SMEs enhances their promotional strategies. Direct field observations and consumer feedback are easily translated into targeted marketing approaches, enabling SMEs to design promotional messages and penetration strategies that suit market conditions. This targeted approach is both cost-efficient and effective, allowing SMEs to focus on relevant consumer segments without relying on expensive trial-and-error methods. Similarly, direct involvement of team members shortens delivery times, including customized orders. SMEs can quickly adjust production and packaging based on consumer needs without lengthy administrative processes. As a result, consumers receive tailored products and more personalized service.

Strategic adaptation in response to market dynamics

The empirical findings reveal that the penetration strategies implemented by SMEs significantly influence both sales network power and sales performance. The empirical findings support H4 and H5. In practice, fast delivery enables products to be easily distributed across multiple sales points, increasing the likelihood of consumer purchases. Moreover, speed in distribution ensures consistent product availability across channels. Continuous product availability not only facilitates initial purchases but also supports repeat transactions, sustaining long-term sales growth. The lean structure of SMEs naturally translates into more efficient pricing. With fewer operational cost components, such as large employee salaries, complex administration, or expensive logistics, product prices remain competitive. For consumers, this provides access to quality products at more affordable prices compared to similar offerings from larger firms with more complex cost structures. As a result, consumers are inclined to purchase larger quantities, whether for personal use, household needs, or resale purposes. This pattern directly contributes to increased SME revenue, driven by both higher purchase frequency and transaction value.

Targeted promotions and the introduction of new product variants reflect the ability of SMEs to identify market opportunities. For consumers, this provides access to a wider range of product options beyond the often-limited alternatives available in the market. Instead of being restricted to monotonous product choices, consumers can select items that better match evolving preferences. Accurate promotional messaging combined with continuous innovation enhances the overall shopping experience, increasing both purchase intention and consumer loyalty. Competitive pricing also ensures that SME products remain attractive to resellers and other business partners, who can secure healthy profit margins upon resale. This creates mutually beneficial relationships, where SMEs maintain sustainable income while business partners remain motivated to promote the products.

Furthermore, well-executed promotional strategies accelerate product circulation in the market. As products gain visibility and popularity among consumers, reseller sales increase, subsequently driving higher demand for SME production. The ability of SMEs to regularly introduce new products, coupled with fast distribution channels, allows resellers to position themselves as trendsetters in local markets. This strategic advantage attracts consumers seeking novel or unique products that are not yet widely available. Business partners who become trendsetters enjoy greater brand recognition and increased customer traffic, which translates into higher profit potential. Consequently, SMEs that consistently deliver product innovation and rapid distribution become more appealing to business partners, providing them with opportunities to secure a first-mover advantage in the market. This capacity for innovation not only demonstrates responsiveness to market changes but also reflects a commitment to building long-term partnerships. By continuously developing new products, enhancing designs, and improving quality, SMEs reinforce partner confidence that the products they promote will remain competitive and relevant over time.

Conclusions

Not all business actors in emerging markets are willing to transition to social commerce. This reluctance often stems from the perception that such platforms prioritize entertainment over transactions, require intensive content creation, and add operational burdens without clear returns. For many SME owners, especially those already operating physical stores, social commerce remains a secondary activity. As a result, limited resource allocation leads to inconsistent adoption. In contrast, SMEs that transition successfully typically demonstrate strong team collectivism, internal alignment, and product suitability to visually driven digital platforms. These factors reduce entry barriers and support smoother integration into the fast-paced landscape of short-video-based commerce.

These findings reinforce the Resource-Advantage Theory of Competition (RAToC) premise that competitive advantage is derived not merely from the possession of valuable resources but from the ability to effectively deploy and combine them in ways that respond to market opportunities. In the context of Indonesian fashion SMEs, where businesses are often managed by small teams or family members, agility in decision-making, efficient coordination, and role clarity emerge as critical capabilities. Such organizational strengths enable SMEs to maintain operational efficiency, support reseller relationships, and sustain customer engagement even under resource constraints.

From a practical standpoint, SMEs with limited resources should adopt differentiated strategies tailored to the distinct business models of TikTok and Instagram. On TikTok, the algorithm rewards frequent, creative, and interactive content, allowing SMEs to achieve organic reach through consistent posting, authentic storytelling, and live streaming without heavy financial investment. On Instagram, success is driven by aesthetic branding, curated visual identity, and strategic influencer partnerships. For resource-constrained SMEs, this means prioritizing visual consistency, leveraging user-generated content, and collaborating with micro-influencers whose audiences align

closely with the brand. By aligning resource allocation with each platform's strengths, fashion SMEs can optimize market penetration, foster stronger customer relationships, and build sustainable competitive advantage in the dynamic landscape of social commerce.

Theoretical implications

This study extends the Resource-Advantage Theory of Competition (RAToC) by demonstrating that possession of superior resources does not necessarily translate into competitive advantage. What matters more is the firm's ability to process, combine, and effectively utilize those resources. This finding refines RAToC by highlighting the role of resource orchestration as a critical mechanism linking resources to performance outcomes.

Practical implications

In terms of limited capital, SMEs can reduce production costs by utilising existing resources. For example, using local models or their own employees for photo shoots and video production eliminates the need to hire professional models. Promotional videos do not need to be long; a duration of 15–30 seconds is sufficient to capture audience attention on TikTok or Instagram Reels. A single video can also be designed to showcase multiple products, allowing one production session to generate promotional materials for several items. This strategy saves costs, time, and effort while maintaining consistent content output on social commerce platforms.

For limited human resources, an effective approach is to recruit or develop team members with multiple skills (multiskilled employees). For instance, one employee may handle product photography and video creation while also managing social media accounts, whereas another may serve customers while overseeing packaging and shipping. Additionally, hiring employees with diverse expertise creates a complementary team, enabling members to fill each other's skill gaps and maintain smooth operations despite a small team size.

Concerning limited technological capabilities, SMEs can take advantage of built-in platform features such as video templates, auto-captioning, and standard filters that require minimal technical skills. Content production can be done using devices already available, such as smartphones with adequate cameras and simple tripods, while making use of natural lighting for optimal visual quality. Editing can be performed with free, user-friendly applications that enable the rapid creation of promotional materials, allowing SMEs to remain competitive without large investments in equipment or software.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research focuses exclusively on SMEs in the fashion sector, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other sectors such as culinary or handicrafts, which possess distinct marketing patterns and consumer characteristics. Second, although a structural model was applied, the research employed a cross-sectional design, which does not capture behavioural changes or the long-term impact of social commerce investment on SME business growth.

Future studies are encouraged to incorporate government regulations as an external factor influencing SME readiness and the effectiveness of social commerce investment. Appropriate regulatory support could serve as a key catalyst in reducing operational costs and enhancing SME access to the broader digital ecosystem. Furthermore, considering the present findings indicate that Social Commerce Investment has yet to demonstrate a significant effect on Pro-Growth Penetration Strategy, in-depth qualitative research is recommended to explore potential psychological or structural barriers that may not be detectable through a purely quantitative approach.

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