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DESIGNING COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SHOPPING JOURNEYS IN E-COMMERCE

Master of Science Thesis

Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences

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ABSTRACT

Emon Datta: **Designing Community-driven Shopping Journeys in E-Commerce**

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Web and app based shopping platforms increasingly rely on community features such as reviews, ratings and user-generated photos to support product discovery, evaluation and trust building. This thesis examines how such community features shape e-commerce shopping journeys and how their design can more meaningfully support user experience. The aim of the thesis is to understand the stage-specific role of community in discovery, decision making, purchase and post-purchase, and to derive practical design implications for community-driven shopping journeys. Therefore, the research questions were: What is the role of community in e-commerce shopping journeys, and how can its integration enhance trust, engagement and user experience? What design strategies can integrate community into platforms in a meaningful way?

The thesis studied literature on e-commerce, social commerce, customer journeys, online communities, trust and user-generated content, and identified a gap in holistic, journey wide examinations of community participation. Empirically, the thesis adopted a qualitative research design from a Human Technology Interaction perspective. Semi structured interviews were conducted with 15 online shoppers who regularly use platforms such as Temu, Shein, Zalando and Daraz. The interviews explored how participants discover products, how they use community features when comparing alternatives, how community signals affect trust and friction at purchase, and how they contribute to or consume community content after buying. The data were analysed with

inductive dominant thematic analysis supported by a coded evidence matrix and cross case comparison.

Based on the literature and the interviews, the thesis identified six key themes describing the role of community in shopping journeys: ***Social discovery with analytical validation***, ***Community evidence as decision engine***, ***Authenticity over marketing***, ***Trust fragility and service dependence***, ***Decision-stage friction*** **and** ***Low post-purchase contribution*****.** Discovery was often triggered by social feeds, influencer content, notifications and friend recommendations, but participants rarely purchased directly from these triggers; instead, they moved to a validation phase dominated by reviews, ratings and user photos. Community evidence functioned as the main decision filter, while authenticity of cues and service experiences strongly influenced trust. At the same time, intrusive engagement features such as aggressive pop-ups and live shopping overlays create friction and sometimes reduce confidence. After purchasing, most participants consumed far more community content than they contributed, relying on a relatively small group of active reviewers for evidence.

On the basis of these findings, the thesis proposes design implications for community-driven e-commerce. Recommended strategies include prioritising authentic user-generated evidence near decision points, connecting discovery features directly to validation tools, constraining intrusive engagement elements in comparison and checkout stages, exposing seller reliability indicators alongside reviews, and lowering barriers for quick, meaningful post-purchase contributions. The thesis suggests that community should be treated as a core structural element of e-commerce journeys rather than an optional add-on, and that carefully designed community features can strengthen both trust and the overall shopping experience.

Keywords: e-commerce, social commerce, community, user-generated content, customer journey, trust, user experience

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PREFACE

Writing this thesis on community-driven shopping journeys in e-commerce has been both challenging and rewarding. The process has deepened my interest in e-commerce, UX and strengthened my motivation to continue working with user-centred digital services. I am grateful for the opportunity to explore a topic that feels so close to everyday life and to see how research can translate into concrete design implications for real platforms.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, PhD Jari Varsaluoma, for his constructive feedback, patient guidance, and encouragement throughout the thesis process. His comments helped me sharpen my research focus and push my thinking further at every stage. I am also thankful to all the participants who generously shared their time and online shopping experiences in the interviews; without their insights, this thesis would not exist.

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Tampere, 24 March, 2026

Emon Datta

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

The rapid advancement of e-commerce and digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped consumer behavior, retail structures, and the mechanisms through which trust and engagement are established in online environments(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Laudon & Traver, 2024). Widespread internet connectivity has expanded the accessibility of online shopping platforms to diverse, geographically dispersed populations, thereby transforming contemporary shopping practices and consumer expectations(Constantinides & https://utwente.academia.edu/EfthymiosConstantinides, 2008; Turban et al., 2018).While innovations in consumer centric interface design, secure payment systems, and mobile technology have enabled seamless transactions, they have simultaneously introduced novel challenges for customer experience management and trust building(Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Concurrently, the emergence of social media and Web 2.0 technologies has created participatory digital ecosystems that blur traditional distinctions between consumers, brands, and communities(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Reilly & Tim, 2007). Social commerce, defined as commerce activity that integrates user-generated content peer reviews, and social networking within digital platforms, positions community as a fundamental source of influence and engagement(Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). As e-commerce platforms mature, the strategic role of community in building trust, providing inspiration, and enhancing user experience has emerged as a critical competitive differentiator in saturated markets(Hajli, 2015).

1.2 Relevance of the Topic and Research Gap

Despite substantial technological and design advances, many e-commerce platforms remain primarily oriented toward transactional efficiency, thereby undervaluing the social and collective dimensions that strengthen trust and engagement(Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2015). Empirical evidence demonstrates that consumer decision making

is influenced not solely by product information and pricing, but significantly by community interactions, peer recommendations, and visible social presence elements fundamental to social commerce effectiveness(Cialdini, 2009). Nonetheless, the systematic integration of community features throughout the entire shopping journey remains largely unexamined in the literature. Current research predominantly treats community elements as supplementary features rather than as essential structural components of user experience(Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Omar & Sulaiman, 2023).

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

What is the role of community in e-commerce shopping journeys, and how can its integration enhance trust, engagement, and user experience?

Sub Questions

1. What design strategies can meaningfully integrate community into e-commerce platforms to create more engaging shopping experiences?
2. In what ways can community participation support different stages of the shopping journey (discovery, decision making, purchase, and post-purchase)?
3. How do community-driven features influence consumer trust, inspiration, and decision making?

This thesis focuses on community-driven shopping journeys within mainstream e-commerce and social commerce platforms. It synthesizes research on customer journey models, user-generated content, trust frameworks, and community oriented design strategies in Chapter 2. Empirically, Chapter 3 describes a qualitative, design oriented methodology based on semi structured interviews with 15 shoppers, and Chapter 4 analyses the interview findings to derive stage-specific roles for community features, design strategies, and trust impacts. While niche models such as peer-to-peer and decentralized commerce are referenced for comparison, they do not constitute the primary focus. The literature scope covers English language academic and practitioner sources published from 2010 onwards, with selected foundational works from earlier periods included where appropriate.

The thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 presents the literature review on the evolution of e-commerce, social commerce paradigms, customer journey frameworks, community features and participation mechanisms, trust and engagement dynamics, and design strategies. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings and discusses how the themes address the research questions. Chapter 5 concludes with implications, design guidelines, limitations, and directions for future research on community-driven shopping journey design.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review synthesizes research on e-commerce, social commerce, customer journeys, trust mechanisms, and community-driven shopping experiences. The review is structured thematically, progressing from foundational concepts of e-commerce and social commerce toward more specific investigations of customer journeys, community participation, trust dynamics, and design strategies. By identifying key gaps in existing literature, particularly the absence of holistic examination of community participation across all shopping journey stages, the review establishes the theoretical foundation and empirical rationale for this thesis.

2.1 E-Commerce and Social Commerce

2.1.1 E-Commerce: Definition and Evolution

E-commerce (electronic commerce) encompasses the buying and selling of products and services over electronic networks, primarily the Internet, supported by integrated digital systems for product search, evaluation, ordering, payment processing, and delivery(Laudon & Traver, 2024). Over two decades, e-commerce has evolved from a peripheral retail channel into a dominant force in global commerce, generating transactions valued in the trillions of dollars annually and fundamentally altering consumer shopping behavior(Constantinides & https://utwente.academia.edu/EfthymiosConstantinides, 2008).

The early phase of e-commerce (1990s through early 2000s) was characterized by catalogue style websites emphasizing transaction efficiency, security protocols, and price competition(Constantinides, 2004). These platforms functioned primarily as digital storefronts with limited mechanisms for customer interaction, peer communication, or community participation. As digital infrastructure advanced and competitive pressures intensified, e-commerce platforms strategically shifted from purely transactional models toward differentiated customer experiences emphasizing engagement and loyalty development(Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2015). This strategic transition coincided with technological evolution: the proliferation of broadband connectivity, mobile

computing, and Web 2.0 technologies enabling user-generated content production, real time interaction, and online community formation(Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Reilly & Tim, 2007).

Contemporary e-commerce encompasses diverse organizational and operational models. Multi channel retailers maintain both physical retail locations and online platforms, integrating inventory and customer data across touchpoints(Morganti et al., 2014). Pure online retailers operate exclusively through digital channels, optimizing logistics and interface design accordingly. Marketplace models, exemplified by Amazon, Alibaba, and eBay, host third-party sellers alongside proprietary offerings, establishing ecosystems wherein reputation mechanisms, user reviews, and community interactions function as core governance structures and trust building systems(K. Z. K. Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). Across these diverse models, community and social features have become increasingly essential for competitive differentiation and customer retention.

2.1.2 The Emergence and Definition of Social Commerce

Social commerce emerged from the convergence of e-commerce and social media, driven by Web 2.0 technologies enabling participatory, user-generated content driven platforms(Constantinides & https://utwente.academia.edu/EfthymiosConstantinides, 2008). Conceptually, social commerce comprises Internet based commercial activities wherein social media platforms and Web 2.0 technologies facilitate user interaction, content sharing, and community participation, thereby assisting consumers in their decision making and purchasing processes(Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; K. Z. K. Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016).

(Huang & Benyoucef, 2013) delineate two primary social commerce configurations: first, e-commerce platforms that integrate social features including customer reviews, ratings, discussion forums, social sharing mechanisms, and algorithmic recommendation systems; and second, social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) that embed commerce functionalities such as product catalogues, checkout flows, and in app purchasing. Both configurations operate on a fundamental principle: by leveraging social

interaction, user-generated content, and community signals, platforms can enhance consumer trust, facilitate inspiration, and strengthen purchase intentions.

Social commerce theory draws from multiple disciplinary foundations. Social presence theory places that communication media vary in their capacity to convey social cues, with higher social presence leading to stronger personal connection and perceived intimacy (Gefen & Straub, 2004). Within e-commerce contexts, features enhancing social presence, such as visible user profiles, synchronous chat functions, and community discussion threads, reduce psychological distance between market participants, thereby making shopping experiences feel more interpersonal and trustworthy(Hajli, 2015; Omar & Sulaiman, 2023). Conversely, social proof theory explains that individuals assess action appropriateness by observing others' behaviors(Cialdini, 2009). In e-commerce environments, social proof manifests through review aggregation, ratings, purchase frequency indicators, and visible community activity, all of which influence prospective buyers' confidence in products and platform trustworthiness(Forman et al., 2008).

2.1.3 Social Commerce Features and Design Elements

Contemporary social commerce platforms employ integrated suites of features designed to facilitate user interaction and community participation. These features commonly include:

Reviews and ratings: Aggregated customer assessments of products, frequently accompanied by individual written reviews providing personal context and experiences. Research demonstrates that both review volume and sentiment significantly influence purchase intentions and perceived product quality(Filieri, 2015a; Forman et al., 2008).

Question and answer sections: Community spaces wherein prospective buyers post product specific queries and experienced customers or sellers provide responses. Q&A features create interactive, dialogic information environments that address data gaps that static product descriptions cannot adequately cover(Khern et al., n.d.).

User profiles and reputation systems: Persistent community member identities, frequently marked with visual reputation indicators (badges, seller ratings, follower counts) and transaction history. These systems promote ongoing participation and

accountability, generating social capital within community structures(Resnick & Zeckhauser, 2002).

Discussion forums and community boards: Dedicated spaces for sustained conversations around products, brands, or consumer interests. Forums cultivate deeper social bonds and enable the formation of virtual communities organized around consumption practices(Kozinets, 2010).

Social feeds and activity streams: Displays of community activity (recent purchases, posted reviews, wishlist updates, product photos), establishing ambient awareness and social presence(Omar & Sulaiman, 2023).

Social recommendations and shared wishlists: Features enabling users to follow peer activities, share product recommendations, or create collaborative wish lists or moodboards, leveraging social networks for product discovery(Lin et al., 2017).

Live shopping and streaming: Synchronous video events wherein host present products, respond to questions, and facilitate purchases while audiences observe and participate(Cai & Wohn, 2019).

Community group buying: Models enabling users to coordinate bulk purchases with peers or local groups to access volume discounts, combining social relationships with collective purchasing power(Lin et al., 2017).

These features operate not as isolated additions but as increasingly integrated components of the shopping flow. (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013)propose a layered architectural model distinguishing the individual level (user profiles, personalization), conversation level (communication tools, content exchange), community level (groups, forums, shared spaces), and commerce level (product information, transactions). Effective social commerce design requires coordinated implementation across all layers, ensuring that social interactions naturally integrate with product discovery, evaluation, and purchasing processes(Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021).

2.1.4 Social Commerce Adoption and Business Impact

Research examining social commerce adoption investigates why and how consumers engage with e-commerce platforms and which features predict usage intentions. Beyond traditional technology acceptance variables such as perceived usefulness and ease of use(Davis, 1989), social factors demonstrate significant predictive power. Social influence, defined as perceived pressure to adopt technologies based on others' behaviors and opinions, consistently predicts social commerce adoption(Bugshan & Attar, 2020; Lin et al., 2017). Similarly, social support, reflecting beliefs that peers encourage platform use, and platform trust both positively predict adoption intentions(Bugshan & Attar, 2020).

Trust represents a critical adoption predictor, as consumers must overcome technology-mediated transaction risks and interpersonal risks associated with relying on user-generated information(Chen & Shen, 2015; Hajli, 2015). Perceived privacy risks and data security concerns inhibit adoption, as do worries regarding manipulated or fraudulent reviews(Filieri, 2015a). Conversely, transparent moderation practices, accessible dispute resolution mechanisms, and visible community governance structures cultivate confidence and support adoption(Bugshan & Attar, 2020).

From a business perspective, social commerce demonstrates substantial positive effects on key performance indicators. Platforms with robust community features report elevated customer engagement metrics (increased session duration, repeat visit frequency), higher average order values (community-influenced users spend more per transaction), and improved customer lifetime value through increased loyalty and advocacy(Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Lin et al., 2017). User-generated content serves as a cost-efficient marketing channel: consumers organically create content regarding products and experiences, extending platform reach and credibility without paid promotional investment(Omar & Sulaiman, 2023).

2.2 Customer Journey and Decision Process

2.2.1 Classical Consumer Decision Process Models

Understanding consumer purchasing decision processes provides essential foundations for designing effective commerce experiences. The Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model, developed in the 1960s and refined through subsequent iterations, remains among the most influential consumer behavior frameworks(Engel et al., 1968). The EKB model posits that consumer decision making progresses through five stages: (1) problem or need recognition (awareness that a want or need exists), (2) information search (accessing internal memory and external sources), (3) evaluation of alternatives (comparing options according to established criteria), (4) purchase decision (selecting and acquiring), and (5) post-purchase evaluation (assessing satisfaction and forming attitudes influencing future decisions).

While this linear, stage based model has proven influential, contemporary research acknowledges significant limitations. Actual consumer behavior frequently exhibits non linear progressions, feedback loops, and emotional or habitual elements that do not conform to discrete stages(Engel et al., 1968). Consumers commonly revisit earlier stages (seeking additional information following initial evaluation), operate under affective influences and mood states alongside rational deliberation, and employ decision heuristics rather than exhaustive information processing(Mensah & Mwakapesa, n.d.). Additionally, decision characteristics, including involvement level (high versus low) and motivational orientation (utilitarian versus hedonic), substantially shape deliberation intensity and information seeking behavior(Zaichkowsky, 1985).

2.2.2 E-Commerce Customer Journeys

E-commerce introduction added substantial complexity to customer journey dynamics. Unlike physical retail environments, where customers complete shopping activities (product examination, staff consultation, purchase) within single locations and timeframes, online shopping typically unfolds across multiple devices, channels, and temporal touchpoints. Customers might encounter products on social media platforms, research them through aggregated review sites, compare prices across retailers, engage in forum

discussions, and ultimately purchase on alternative devices or after substantial delays(Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

(Verhoef et al., 2015) extend the customer journey concept to encompass comprehensive customer interactions with brands across all channels and touchpoints. They conceptualize customer experience as "the customer's cognitive and affective assessment of all direct and indirect interactions with a firm" (Verhoef et al., 2015, P. 223). This holistic framing acknowledges that customer satisfaction and loyalty derive not solely from individual transactions but from cumulative experience quality across all relationship interactions.

In e-commerce contexts, research identifies several critical journey stages relevant to online shopping: awareness and discovery (product or retailer awareness mechanisms), consideration and evaluation (option comparison), purchase (transaction completion), and post-purchase (fulfillment, support, and repeat purchase decisions)(Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). At each stage, customers encounter distinct touchpoints and information sources. During discovery, search engines, recommendations, social media platforms, and influencer content assume prominent roles. In consideration phases, product pages, user reviews, comparison tools, and peer recommendations become essential. During purchase, cart management, checkout friction, and trust signals influence completion rates. Post-purchase, customer service quality, delivery experiences, and community engagement opportunities affect satisfaction and repeat purchase likelihood(Verhoef et al., 2009).

2.2.3 Social and Community Integration in E-Commerce Journeys

While classical journey models emphasize information processing and decision progression stages, they do not explicitly address social interaction and community participation. However, contemporary research demonstrates that social elements increasingly shape how consumers navigate and experience e-commerce journeys(Hajli, 2015; Lin et al., 2017).

In discovery phases, community-driven features including trending product lists, user-generated visual content, and social feeds enhance unexpected discovery and

inspiration(Omar & Sulaiman, 2023). For instance, consumers encountering friends' posts on social platforms might discover products within previously unconsidered categories. Similarly, live shopping on platforms such as TikTok Shop and Amazon Live interaction, product demonstration, and community participation, creating discovery experiences that feel social and experiential rather than transactional(Cai & Wohn, 2019).

In consideration phases, user reviews, Q&A sections, and community discussions provide social proof and address information gaps. Rather than relying exclusively on product descriptions or expert reviews, consumers access accounts from peers with similar preferences or use cases, thereby building confidence in selections(Filieri, 2015a; Forman et al., 2008). Community group buying models similarly operate during consideration, with group members collectively reviewing options and selecting items cooperatively, leveraging social support to mitigate individual purchase risk(Lin et al., 2017).

At purchase stages, community elements including chat, peer recommendations, or purchase frequency indicators ("1,200 people purchased this") provide final reassurance and encourage transaction completion. Social risk, reflecting concerns regarding peer judgments of one's purchase, can be substantially mitigated through visible community adoption and peer validation(Omar & Sulaiman, 2023).

Post-purchase, community features emphasize engagement and retention. Customers may produce reviews, participate in forums, or share experiences on social media, establishing opportunities for platform contact maintenance and loyalty cultivation(Kozinets, 2010). Certain platforms explicitly encourage post-purchase community participation through gamification mechanisms, reputation systems, or exclusive community benefits, transforming customers into advocates(Schau et al., 2009).

Overall, while classical decision process models provide useful analytical frameworks, they do not fully capture how contemporary e-commerce journeys are enriched, complicated, and sometimes accelerated by integrated social and community features. A more comprehensive model would position community participation as woven throughout the journey rather than confined to post-purchase phases.

2.3 Community, Trust, and User-Generated Content

2.3.1 Online Communities and Virtual Communities of Consumption

Online communities constitute technology mediated aggregations of individuals connected through shared interests or practices, sustained by ongoing interaction and communication(Kozinets, 2010; Rheingold, 2000). Within commercial contexts, researchers distinguish virtual communities of consumption as communities organized around product, brand, or consumption experience engagement(Kozinets, 2010; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Virtual communities of consumption exhibit several defining characteristics. They are structured around shared knowledge and enthusiasm regarding specific products or brands (particular technology enthusiasts or fashion communities). Members gather to exchange information, solve problems collaboratively, celebrate shared experiences, and construct collective meanings regarding consumption objects(Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009). These communities typically transcend geographic boundaries, with members distributed globally yet connected through digital platforms. Critically, community members derive value not solely from products themselves but from social bonds, identity reinforcement, and emotional support provided within group contexts(Kozinets, 2010).

From organizational perspectives, virtual communities of consumption generate multiple value forms. They function as customer insight and feedback sources, enabling firms to comprehend user needs and preferences(Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). They generate advocacy, with satisfied community members promoting products to others. They facilitate value co-creation, wherein customers collaboratively develop product improvements, customize offerings, or provide mutual troubleshooting assistance(Schau et al., 2009). They provide cost effective marketing, as enthusiastic community members organically promote products and attract new participants(Kozinets, 2010).

Simultaneously, research demonstrates that online communities are heterogeneous entities. (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001)developed the communities of practice concept, describing groups united by common interests and evolving expertise, with varying

participation levels (core participants, active participants, peripheral participants, outsiders). Similarly, consumer communities exhibit differentiated participation levels and roles: prolific contributors create content and moderate discussions; regular participants maintain ongoing involvement; substantial populations remain "lurkers" consuming content without visible contribution(Kozinets, 2010; Omar & Sulaiman, 2023).

Research on community participation demonstrates that even passive, lurking members benefit from and contribute value to communities. Lurkers acquire informational and emotional support by observing others' interactions and may overcome barriers to purchase and use(Kozinets, 2010). The visible presence of active members and rich community content, observed even by lurkers, enhances social presence within environments, strengthening trust and perceived legitimacy(Omar & Sulaiman, 2023).

2.3.2 User-Generated Content, Reviews, and Social Proof

User-generated content (UGC), defined as content created and publicly shared by end users rather than organizations or professional producers, has become central to social commerce and community participation in e-commerce(Daugherty et al., 2008; Omar & Sulaiman, 2023). Common e-commerce UGC forms include product reviews, ratings, photographs, videos, Q&A responses, forum discussions, and social media posts regarding purchases and experiences.

Empirical research substantially demonstrates that UGC significantly influences consumer decision making and purchase intentions. Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) conducted research on Amazon and eBay book sales, finding strong correlations between online review volume and sentiment with sales outcomes. (Filieri, 2015a) extended this work across product categories, confirming that consumer reviews increase purchase likelihood across diverse contexts. (Filieri, 2015a) synthesizes this literature, concluding that online reviews rank among the most trusted and impactful decision making information sources, frequently exceeding expert reviews or advertising in influence.

The mechanisms through which UGC influences trust and decision making are multifaceted. First, reviews provide social proof, offering visible evidence that others have valued and benefited from products, thereby reducing uncertainty and perceived risk for

prospective buyers(Cialdini, 2009). Second, reviews furnish detailed, contextually specific information that product descriptions alone cannot provide: consumers learn not merely that products function but how they perform under particular conditions, for specific use cases, or with particular tradeoffs(Khern et al., n.d.). Third, review diversity, including negative or mixed feedback, can counterintuitively strengthen trust by signaling transparency and authenticity(Filieri, 2015a; Khern et al., n.d.). Consumers frequently trust platforms displaying genuine, unfiltered user opinions, including critical assessments, more than platforms presenting only positive content potentially appearing curated or manipulated.

Q&A features operate similarly to reviews but employ interactive, dialogic formats. Rather than reading static assessments, consumers pose specific questions receiving answers from experienced users or sellers, facilitating personalized and targeted information exchange(Khern et al., n.d.). This interactive dimension proves particularly valuable for complex or niche products where standard product information inadequately addresses all relevant concerns.

However, the relationship between UGC and trust is not straightforward. UGC authenticity, quality, and manipulation potential affect credibility substantially. (Filieri, 2015a) notes consumer skepticism regarding reviews, particularly when overwhelmingly positive, suggesting possible fake reviews or paid endorsements. Fake reviews, inauthentic assessments posted by competitors, paid marketers, or platform stakeholders, represent significant concerns potentially eroding platform trust if detected(Bugshan & Attar, 2020; Filieri, 2015a). Platforms increasingly employ detection mechanisms and user credibility signals to address these risks, though ongoing competition between manipulators and detection systems persists.

2.3.3 Social Presence, Engagement, and Community Well-Being

Beyond trust mechanisms, community features influence consumer engagement and emotional well-being. Social presence theory suggests that media and environments with high social presence, wherein users perceive others as psychologically present, improve deeper engagement, personal connection, and emotional investment(Gefen & Straub,

2004). Features enhancing social presence include visible user profiles, live chat with customers or sellers, visible activity streams displaying recent community actions, and collaborative tools(Omar & Sulaiman, 2023). High social presence associates with extended session durations, increased repeat visits, and greater purchase likelihood(Hajli, 2015). Moreover, hedonic, enjoyable aspects of shopping experiences fun and social satisfaction derived from browsing, discussing products, and interacting with like minded peers can drive engagement independent of utilitarian needs(Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Omar & Sulaiman, 2023).

However, not all community features equally enhance well-being. Emerging research on social media and online community design increasingly acknowledges potential negative effects including comparison anxiety, addiction, and reduced autonomy(Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Poorly designed gamification, manipulative engagement tactics (artificial scarcity, social pressure), and lack of transparency regarding algorithmic curation can undermine user autonomy and trust. This underscores the importance of ethical, user centered design in community features, ensuring community tools enhance rather than exploit well-being.

Recent work on community well-being in digital contexts emphasizes value co-creation benefiting individual participants and broader communities(Cai & Wohn, 2019; Schau et al., 2009). From this perspective, community features should support not only individual transactions but also ongoing relationships, collective knowledge development, and mutual support.

2.4 Design and UX Strategies for Community-Driven Shopping

2.4.1 Design Frameworks for Social Commerce

Multiple researchers have proposed design frameworks guiding social element integration into e-commerce platforms. (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013) present one of the most influential models, distinguishing four social commerce architecture levels:

Individual level: User profiles, preferences, and personalization engines tailoring content and recommendations to individual users. This level enables users to express identity and receive customized experiences.

Conversation level: Direct communication tools (messaging, chat, email) enabling dialogue between users and platform representatives. This level facilitates information exchange and relationship development.

Community level: Group interaction spaces including forums, discussion boards, social feeds, Q&A sections, and groups organized around shared interests. This level enables many to many communication and collective knowledge development.

Commerce level: Product information, search functionality, recommendations, shopping cart, checkout processes, and transaction completion. This level encompasses transactional core operations.

Huang and Benyoucef argue that effective social commerce design requires coordinated support across all four levels, with social features meaningfully integrated into commerce flows rather than appended as afterthoughts. This integrated approach contrasts with platforms where social elements appear disconnected, as when review sections are visually and functionally separated from product pages, or social media links require users to exit shopping environments.

Subsequent design research has elaborated specific patterns and best practices. (Bugshan & Attar, 2020) surveys social commerce design features across leading platforms, identifying effective review, recommendation, rating, and user profile configurations. (Omar & Sulaiman, 2023) synthesize design literature, proposing that effective social commerce requires attention to information quality (providing rich, diverse user perspectives), social presence (making users and interactions visible), personalization (tailoring content and recommendations), and trust assurance (signals of platform safety and authenticity).

2.4.2 Community Features Across Journey Stages

While frameworks such as Huang and Benyoucef's model provide value, they often do not specify how community features should be distributed and integrated across customer journey stages. However, recent work on journey mapping and user experience design emphasizes touchpoint level design importance, considering how specific features should be presented and function at specific journey moments(Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009).

Discovery stages present opportunities where customers may not yet know what they want or which products exist. Community features supporting discovery include trending lists displaying popular items, user-generated photos and videos demonstrating products, influencer recommendations, social feeds showing friends' purchases or wishlists, and live shopping events. The objective is to surface inspiration and render community activity visible as discovery mechanisms(Omar & Sulaiman, 2023).

Consideration stages require features supporting specific option evaluation. Customers benefit from aggregated reviews and ratings, detailed Q&A sections addressing product-specific questions, user-generated photos revealing real use cases beyond official product imagery, and item comparisons. User-generated content revealing both product benefits and limitations proves particularly valuable during this phase(Filieri, 2015a; Forman et al., 2008).

Purchase stages present final opportunities for hesitation reduction. Community signals including purchase counts ("1,200 people purchased this this month"), real time reviews from recent buyers, live chat for recent questions, and visible inventory levels (indicating popular demand) collectively reassure and encourage transaction completion (Hajli, 2015; W. Zhang & Huang, 2024).

Post-purchase stages require features emphasizing customer satisfaction, retention, and advocacy. These include spaces for customers to seek usage advice from peers, opportunities to share experiences and write reviews, gamified loyalty or reputation systems, and exclusive community benefits or early product access (Omar & Sulaiman, 2023; Schau et al., 2009).

The implication is that community features require thoughtful stage appropriate calibration rather than one size fits all implementation.

2.4.3 Design Knowledge Gaps and Research Opportunity

While the reviewed literature provides useful frameworks and empirical findings, several important gaps persist:

Holistic journey perspective: Most design work addresses individual features or platform specific architectures without systematically examining community participation progression across journey stages and how different community elements collectively shape overall experience and outcomes.

User centered community design: While some research emphasizes engagement and growth design, limited work adopts an explicitly user centered, human technology interaction perspective prioritizing user agency, well-being, and meaningful participation over pure engagement metrics.

Integrated outcomes analysis: While studies address trust, engagement, or user experience separately, limited empirical work connects these outcomes and examines how specific design strategies simultaneously influence trust, engagement, and shopping experience quality.

Diverse e-commerce models: Most design research concentrates on dominant models (large marketplace platforms, social commerce on social media sites). Emerging models such as peer-to-peer commerce, community group buying, or niche community oriented platforms remain understudied.

Ethical and sustainable design: Growing concerns regarding manipulative engagement and platform well-being effects persist. Design guidance balancing platform objectives with user well-being and autonomy remains underdeveloped.

2.5 Summary and Theoretical Framework

Literature on e-commerce, social commerce, customer journeys, community, and design reveals a landscape in substantial transition. As e-commerce matures, competitive

advantage increasingly derives from superior customer experience and engagement rather than from price or transaction functionality alone. Social commerce and community features, including reviews, Q&A sections, user profiles, live shopping, and collaborative tools, have become standard in leading platforms, with research confirming their positive effects on trust (Cialdini, 2009; Filieri, 2015b), inspiration (Omar & Sulaiman, 2023), and purchase intention.

Customer journey research underscores the importance of understanding and optimizing experiences across all touchpoints and stages (e.g. reviews/Q&A in consideration; Forman et al., 2008)). While classical decision process models (such as the EKB model) provide useful analytical foundations, contemporary journeys manifest greater complexity, non linearity, and substantial influence from social and community elements distributed across devices and touchpoints temporally. For SQ1, literature offers frameworks like (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013) layers for integration, but lacks stage-specific, user centered strategies. Community participation generates value through multiple pathways: social proof mechanisms, peer information exchange, and emotional support provision. User-generated content, particularly reviews and Q&A responses, rank among the most influential sources shaping consumer trust and decision making. Moreover, community features enhance engagement and hedonic satisfaction, making shopping experiences more enjoyable and social.

However, existing research and design guidance frequently treat these elements, including social commerce, customer journeys, community participation, trust, and user experience, as somewhat separate domains. A critical gap exists in holistically examining how community participation integrates across entire shopping journeys and how different community features and design strategies collectively influence trust, engagement, and user experience throughout customer lifecycles. Furthermore, most design frameworks operate at platform or feature levels without providing detailed, user-centered guidance for specific touchpoint design and decision making at distinct journey stages.

This thesis addresses these gaps through empirical investigation of community-driven shopping journeys from a Human Technology Interaction perspective, with the objective

of deriving design oriented insights and strategies for meaningfully embedding community throughout e-commerce shopping experiences. By examining how users experience and value community at different journey stages and by analyzing design decisions and trade offs involved in community integration, this thesis contributes both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for community-driven e-commerce design.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter first outlines the research design and participant sample, then explains the data collection, transcription, and inductive dominant coding process used to analyze the interviews.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the overall research design and analysis process from research questions to themes and practical implications.

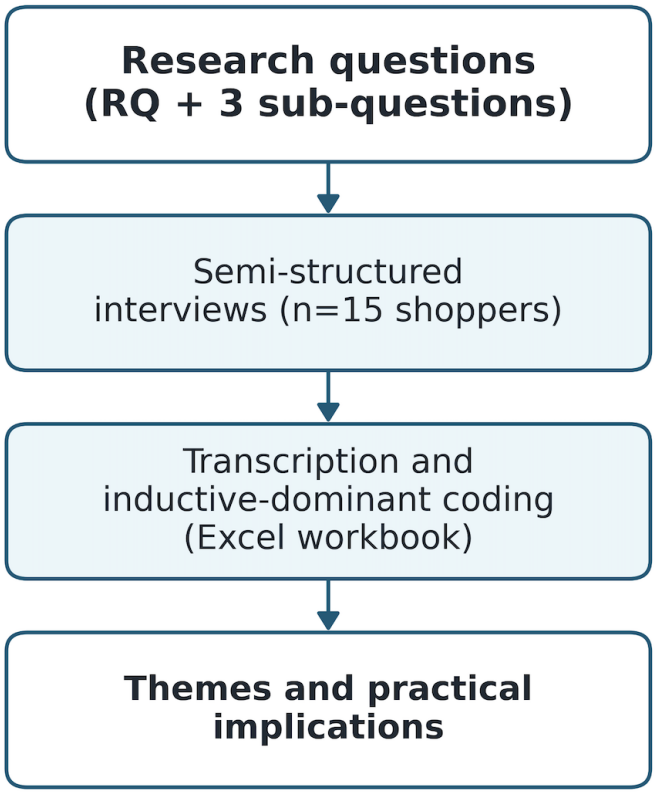

Figure 3.1 Overall research design and analysis process.

3.1 Research Design and Participants

This qualitative study employs an exploratory, design oriented approach from a Human Technology Interaction perspective to investigate community-driven shopping journeys in

e-commerce. The research design is based on semi-structured interviews with online shoppers (n = 15). The interviews capture lived user experiences across shopping journey stages and explore how community features influence discovery, decision making, purchase, post-purchase behaviour, and perceptions of trust, inspiration, and engagement, directly addressing the research questions.

Fifteen participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure relevance and diversity. Inclusion criteria were: (1) aged 18+, (2) online shopping frequency of at least a few times per year, and (3) experience with at least one of the target platforms (such as Shein, Temu, Zalando, or Daraz). Sampling targeted variation in age, gender, and shopping habits (fashion focused vs. more general) to reveal diverse community usage patterns. Recruitment occurred via personal networks (friends, friends of friends) and online groups (e.g., messaging groups and social media communities in Bangladesh and Finland). All participants were shoppers; no platform employees or designers were interviewed in this study.

Figure 3.2 shows how often participants reported shopping online, with most shopping one to two times per month.

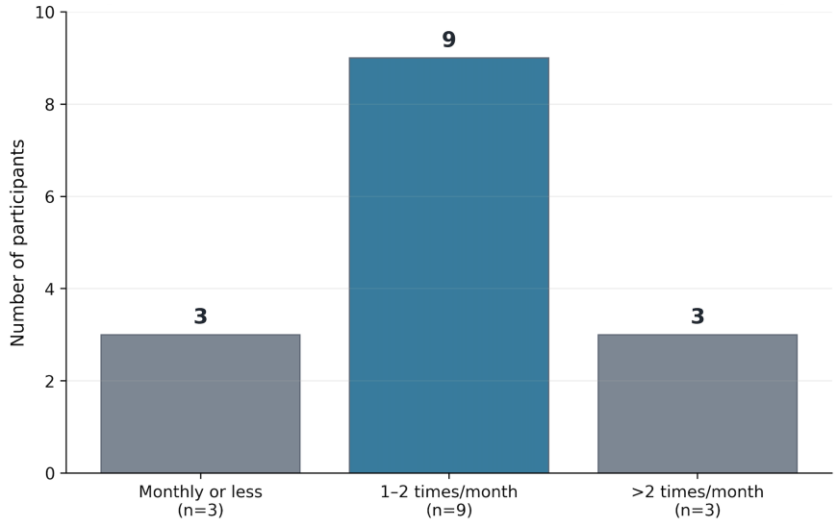

Figure 3.2 Online shopping frequency among participants.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection consists of semi-structured interviews conducted between February and March 2026.

Semi-structured interviews (approximately 10–20 minutes in practice) were delivered online via Zoom, audio recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide (Appendix A) is structured around customer journey stages described in prior research on customer experience in multi channel contexts and social commerce. It covers participant background and general shopping habits, discovery, consideration and decision making, purchase, post-purchase, and perceived overall impacts of community features. Probes (for example, “Can you give an example?” or “When was the last time this happened?”) were used to elicit detailed experiences rather than short opinions. The interview guide was first piloted with two participants to refine wording and timing, after which full data collection started following the sampling strategy described above. In total, 15 interviews were conducted, with a combined audio duration of approximately 155 minutes. Before each interview, participants received a short information sheet and consent form (see Appendix B: Informed Consent Form).

Figure 3.3 presents the step-by-step process from audio recordings through transcription and coding to the final themes.

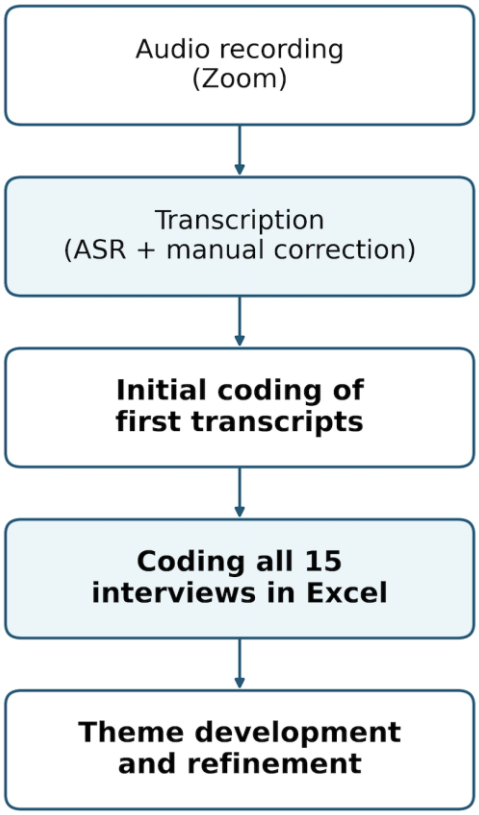

Figure 3.3 Step by step process from interview recordings to final themes.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was used to analyse the interview data. The process included: (1) transcription and familiarisation with each interview, (2) inductive and deductive coding using MS Excel, (3) generating candidate themes clustered around the research questions (for example, stage-specific roles of community features, trust building and trust breaking mechanisms, discovery patterns, and post-purchase behaviour), (4) reviewing and refining themes against the coded data, and (5) interpreting the themes in relation to existing literature on e-commerce, social commerce, community, and customer journeys.

Coding was inductive dominant: an initial codebook was developed from the first few transcripts and then iteratively refined as further interviews were coded. Code frequencies and theme summaries were documented in an analysis workbook to support transparency and traceability. Themes were then organised to reflect the different stages of the shopping journey and the three sub questions, focusing on design relevant insights and perceived effects on trust, inspiration, and decision making. Member checking was carried out by sharing brief summaries with a subset of participants to ensure that the interpretations resonated with their experiences, enhancing the trustworthiness of the analysis.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols prioritize participant welfare and data integrity. Informed consent is obtained verbally and in writing prior to interviews, detailing study purpose, voluntary participation, right to withdraw, and data use. Anonymity is ensured via pseudonyms; no identifying details (e.g., platform usernames) are recorded. Audio files and transcripts are stored on password protected device. No incentives are offered to minimize coercion. Given that participants were recruited from both Bangladesh and Finland, ethical procedures also considered cultural and contextual differences. Information materials were provided in clear, non-technical language, and participants were reminded that participation was voluntary and would not affect any services they use. When reporting findings, quotes were lightly edited to remove incidental identifiers, and potentially sensitive details were generalized to minimize the risk of indirect identification.

4. RESULTS

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the 15 semi-structured interviews and organizes them according to key shopping journey stages and the main themes identified in the thematic analysis. The structure follows the logic of the research questions by first outlining participant and platform context, then examining how community features shape discovery, decision making, purchase stage trust and friction, and post-purchase behaviour.

Across the shopping journey, the analysis identified one dominant theme for discovery, one for decision-making, two for the purchase stage, and one for post-purchase, summarised in Table 4.1 below.

Journey Stage	**Main Themes**
Discovery	Social Discovery with Analytical Validation
Decision making	Community Evidence as Decision Engine
Purchase	Authenticity over Marketing; Trust Fragility and Service Dependence; Decision-stage Friction
Post-purchase	Low Post-Purchase Contribution

Table 4.1. Overview of main themes across shopping journey stages.

4.1 Participant and platform overview

The interview sample consisted of 15 online shoppers who reported varying levels of experience with e-commerce, ranging from occasional purchases to frequent, habit like browsing. Most participants described shopping online approximately one to two times per month, while a smaller group shopped less frequently or browsed daily and purchased slightly more often. This distribution indicates that all participants were familiar with online shopping, but did not represent heavy and professional shoppers.

Participants mentioned several platforms, but a small set of large marketplaces dominated their usage. Temu and Shein were the most commonly used platforms, often described as primary or default choices, while Zalando and Daraz were used more

selectively for certain product categories or regions, with additional use of platforms such as Vinted, HM, local shops, and general web search for specific needs.

As shown in Figure 4.2, Temu and Shein were the most frequently used platforms, followed by Zalando and a long tail of other or local platforms.

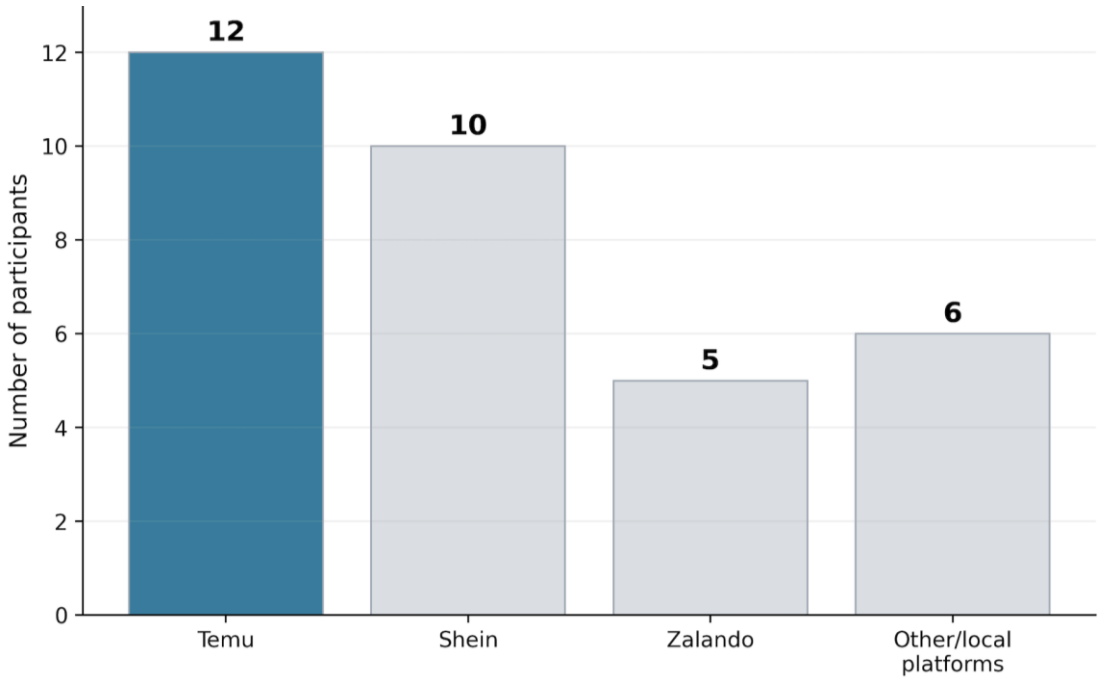

Figure 4.2. Most frequently used online shopping platforms among 15 participants.

Across these platforms, participants typically engaged with a mixture of marketplace environments that host multiple sellers (e.g., Temu, Shein, Daraz) and more brand centric or curated stores (e.g., Zalando, local brand sites). Several participants explicitly contrasted perceived trustworthiness between these platform types (marketplaces versus direct brand platforms), noting that **direct brand platforms felt safer and more predictable**, whereas marketplaces offered more variety but also required more careful evaluation of sellers and products. Because most participants relied on large marketplaces but perceived direct brand platforms as safer, later findings about community features should be interpreted as ways shoppers manage the higher uncertainty they associate with marketplaces.

4.2 Discovery: social discovery with analytical validation

Participants described a discovery phase in which products and ideas surfaced through a combination of platform driven feeds, social media content, notifications, and social ties. Many participants (12/15) mentioned homepage feeds and personalized recommendations in Temu or Shein as continuous sources of inspiration, sometimes leading them to explore categories they had not initially planned to browse.

Social media, particularly TikTok and Instagram, played a notable role for several participants (7/15) by surfacing reels, influencer content, or advertisements that then redirected them to e-commerce platforms. For example, one participant explained that they kept notifications on for Shein and frequently received ideas for products from app alerts and social reels: “Sometimes I see a dress in a reel and then go to Shein to check the real pictures and reviews before I decide” (P4).

Discovery was also shaped by interpersonal and community signals, especially friend recommendations and shared links. Several participants (9/15) described seeing links shared in messaging apps or social media, or hearing about products in casual conversations, and then later searching the same items on Temu, Shein, or Zalando. In addition, trending and “popular” lists inside platforms were reported as convenient entry points for browsing, especially for fashion and seasonal items, although this pattern was mentioned by a smaller subset of participants (5/15).

However, most participants (13/15) did not treat discovery cues as sufficient grounds for purchase on their own. Even when they encountered an appealing product through feeds, influencers, or friends, they typically moved into a more deliberate validation phase before deciding. This transition was often described as almost automatic: after an initial spark of interest, they opened the product page and scrolled directly to reviews, ratings, and user photos to verify quality, fit, and realism, especially when products were inexpensive or visually attractive but potentially risky.

Figure 4.3 shows that reviews and user photos were the most widely used community signals during product comparison, followed by ratings and popularity indicators.

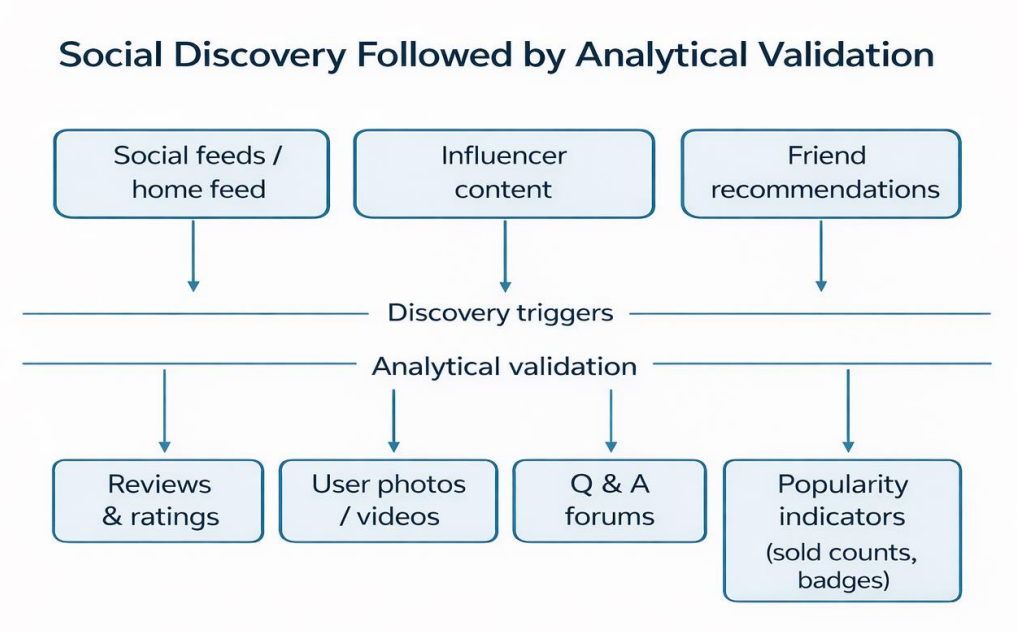

Figure 4.3. Use of community signals during product comparison.

Overall, the discovery stage can be characterized as socially and algorithmically driven, but tightly coupled to downstream community evidence. Participants appeared comfortable letting feeds, influencers, and friends broaden their option set, yet consistently framed these signals as “starting points” that required confirmation through other users’ experiences before they felt confident to proceed. From a design perspective, these findings suggest that social and algorithmic discovery tools should be tightly connected to review and rating features, so that users can move seamlessly from inspiration to analytical validation.

4.3 Decision making: community evidence as decision engine

In the consideration and comparison stage, community evidence became the central mechanism through which participants filtered alternatives and converged on specific products. Fourteen out of fifteen participants reported using reviews and user photos when deciding what to purchase, and thirteen mentioned star ratings as part of their evaluation. Popularity indicators such as bestseller tags, sold counts, or “top seller”

badges were also highlighted by eight participants as useful additional cues, while friend recommendations and Q&A or forum content played supporting roles for a smaller subset.

Figure 4.4 shows that reviews and user photos were the most widely used community signals during product comparison, followed closely by ratings, while Q&A forums, popularity indicators, and live content played more supporting roles, with the bars ordered from most to least frequently mentioned signal.

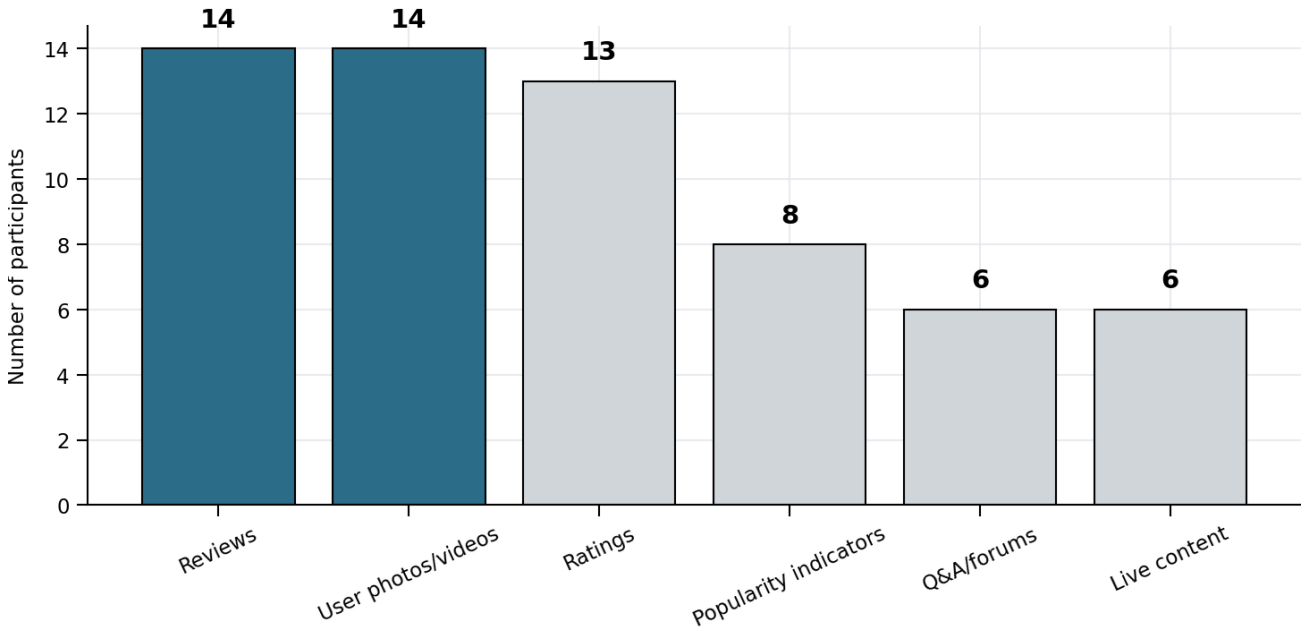

Figure 4.4. Use of community signals during product comparison.

Participants did not simply glance at ratings; they described a nuanced reading of review sections. Many explained that review volume and distribution mattered as much as the average score: a product with a slightly lower rating but hundreds or thousands of reviews was often preferred over one with a perfect rating and very few reviews. One participant, for example, contrasted a five star product with a small number of sales against a four star product with thousands of purchases and concluded that the latter felt more trustworthy. Others reported explicitly checking the ratio of negative to positive reviews, the presence of detailed written comments, and whether reviewers mentioned the same concerns that they personally had, such as sizing, material quality, or delivery issues.

User-generated photos and videos were described as particularly valuable in bridging the gap between polished product imagery and actual use. Participants often opened the

photo filter in review sections and scrolled through images to see how clothing looked on different body types, how colors appeared in natural lighting, or how products fit into actual home environments. Several participants contrasted these photos with official product images, emphasizing that seller photos could be overly edited, staged, or exaggerated, whereas user photos were perceived as more honest and therefore more predictive of their own experience. In some cases, participants reported explicitly abandoning a potential purchase when user photos revealed that a product looked fake, low quality, or significantly different from the catalogue images.

While reviews, ratings, and user photos formed the core evidence base, other community elements supplemented these judgments. Some participants mentioned consulting Q&A sections or external forums when products were more technical, or when they needed clarification that standard descriptions did not provide. Popularity indicators such as “most popular”, “bestseller”, or “top selling seller” badges acted as lightweight social proof, signalling that many others had successfully purchased the product. A few participants described these labels as “shortcuts” that reduced the perceived need for extensive additional research, although one participant also expressed scepticism towards more aggressive numerical claims such as “X% of people bought this”, which were perceived as potentially manipulative.

Taken together, these practices show that community evidence functions as a decision engine that structures how participants interpret platform content. Rather than treating customer reviews and media as optional extra information, most participants made them a mandatory step in their comparison process, often refusing to buy products that lacked sufficient volume or quality of community feedback. This pattern provides a strong empirical basis for the theme “Community Evidence as Decision Engine” and underscores the importance of how platforms surface and structure such evidence at the Decision-stage. From a design perspective, platforms should foreground rich review content and user photos at comparison points, and clearly indicate when products lack sufficient community evidence.

4.4 Trust, authenticity, and Decision-stage friction

4.4.1 Authenticity over marketing

A prominent cross cutting theme concerned authenticity: participants repeatedly reported favouring customer generated media and mixed review profiles over highly polished marketing content. They described situations where seller images appeared “too perfect” or heavily edited, which triggered doubts about product realism and even suspicions of deception. In contrast, user photos and videos showing products in everyday settings, with imperfect lighting and visible wear, were framed as reassuring and more useful for assessing what they would actually receive.

Several participants (6/15) also noted that the presence of some negative or critical reviews increased their trust in the overall review set. Completely uniform, overly positive feedback was sometimes interpreted as a potential sign of fake or incentivized reviews, whereas a mix of positive and negative experiences suggested that feedback had not been artificially curated. Participants emphasized that they did not expect products to be flawless; instead, they wanted enough information to understand likely trade offs and decide whether those trade offs were acceptable for their use.

Figure 4.5 summarizes the main trust building and trust breaking signals that emerged from the interviews. Trust builders included high review volume, recent and detailed reviews, realistic user photos and videos, visible sales or bestseller indicators, and responsive customer support with clear policies. Trust breakers included fake looking or overly polished seller images, suspicious or repetitive review patterns, rude or slow support and delivery problems, and overwhelming pop-ups or fake countdowns that felt manipulative rather than informative.

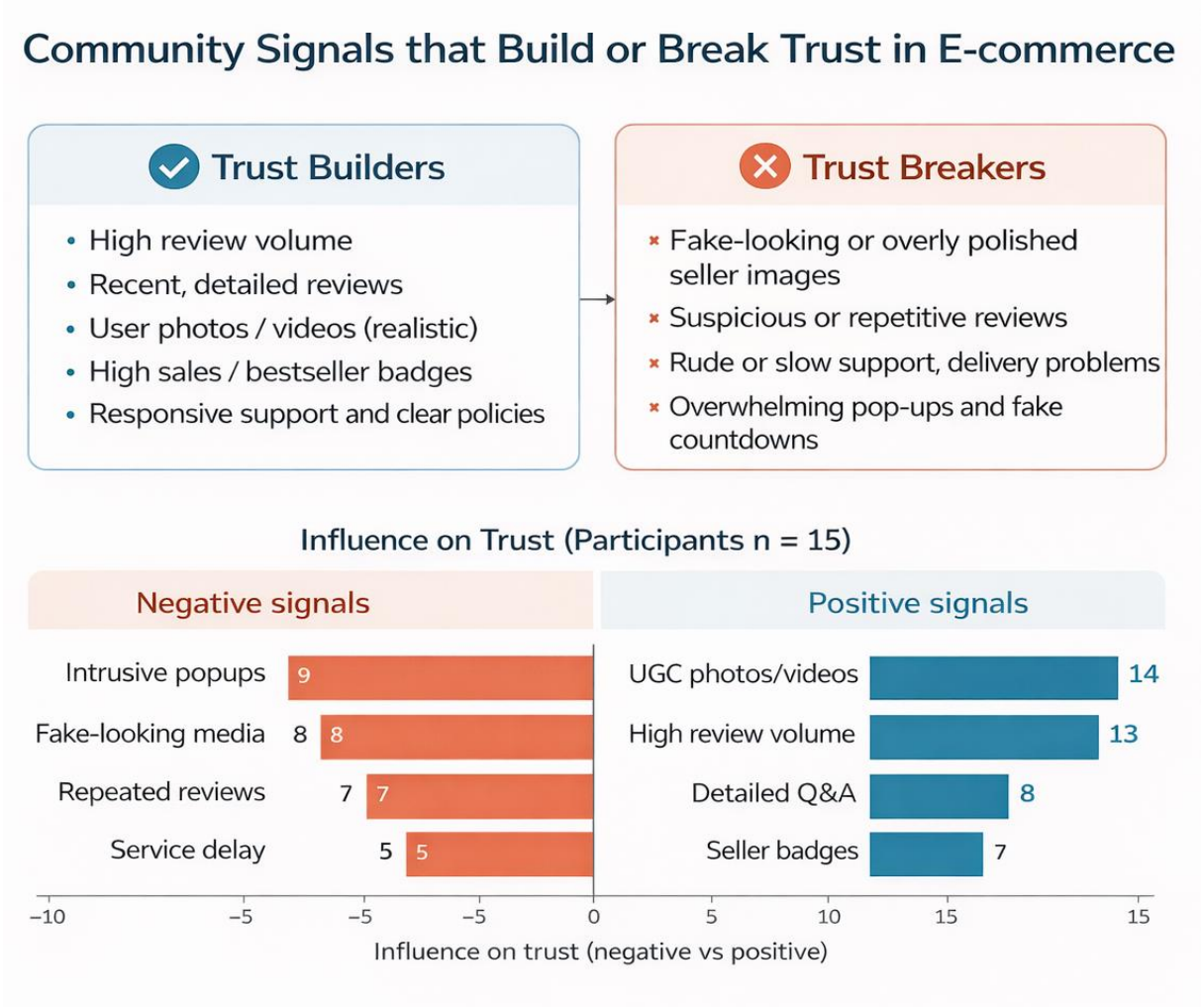

Figure 4.5 Community signals that build or undermine trust in e-commerce.

4.4.2 Trust fragility and service dependence

Although community signals helped participants build confidence, trust was also described as fragile and sensitive to negative service experiences. A few participants recounted episodes where customer support interactions or delivery failures shifted their perception of a seller or platform from acceptable to untrustworthy. One participant, for instance, described repeatedly ordering from a social media based shop with good products, but ultimately deciding never to return after a combination of rude customer service, unexpected prepayment demands, and late delivery that required personally visiting a delivery station. Another participant described a case where a lack of review evidence preceded receiving a poorly sized or fake product, which led them to avoid

similar low evidence situations in the future and to rely more heavily on reviews and photos.

These accounts illustrate that community evidence and service performance jointly shape trust trajectories. Even strong community signals can be overridden by negative experiences with support, delivery, or perceived policy unfairness, while positive support interactions can sometimes compensate for minor product issues. From a design perspective, this suggests that integrating seller reliability signals and service quality indicators alongside community content may help users form more stable trust assessments.

4.4.3 Decision-stage friction

In addition to trust building and trust breaking signals, participants discussed various sources of friction that disrupted comparison and purchase decisions. Most of these friction points were directly related to community or engagement features that were perceived as excessive or poorly timed. For example, participants criticized intrusive pop-ups, constant notifications, and aggressive gamified elements such as countdown timers and attention grabbing banners, especially when these appeared during moments when they were trying to compare products or read reviews.

Live shopping and live style pop-ups were another source of mixed reactions. While some participants appreciated live demonstrations as discovery tools, others described the associated pop-ups as chaotic, distracting, or irrelevant to their immediate task. One participant described live shopping pop-ups as making the interface feel overly busy when they simply wanted to read reviews and check product details. Similarly, frequent mobile notifications and social style alerts were reported as fatiguing, especially when they did not align with the user's current interests or when they appeared repeatedly after a product had already been dismissed.

These findings are captured by the theme "Decision-stage Friction", which highlights that community and engagement features can undermine trust and efficiency if they interrupt or compete with core decision tasks. Rather than rejecting social and promotional elements altogether, participants implicitly called for better timing, control, and relevance,

wanting community evidence to be prominent near decision points and more attention seeking features to be restrained in comparison and checkout flows. From a design perspective, this means that platforms should avoid intrusive pop-ups, persistent countdown timers, and unrelated live shopping prompts in review and checkout views, reserving such attention seeking elements for earlier, exploratory stages of the journey.

4.5 Post-purchase behaviour and contribution

Post-purchase behavior revealed clear asymmetry between consuming community content and contributing back to it. Most participants (13/15) reported reading reviews extensively before purchasing, but only a minority (4/15) described leaving reviews or other contributions regularly afterwards.

Figure 4.6, the sample can be roughly divided into three segments: a group with low or no contribution who rarely leave reviews or engage with community features, a group with conditional engagement who contribute when experiences are very positive or very negative, and a small group of active contributors who routinely share reviews and photos.

Figure 4.6 Spectrum of post-purchase community contribution among participants.

Low contribution participants described relying heavily on others' reviews while rarely adding their own feedback. They cited reasons such as lack of time, forgetting, perceiving reviews as unnecessary for inexpensive products, or not seeing immediate personal benefit in contributing. Some framed reviewing as something they "should" do but realistically did not prioritize after the purchase, especially once they were satisfied and had moved on to other tasks.

Conditional contributors tended to leave reviews when experiences deviated strongly from expectations, either positively or negatively. For example, some participants mentioned writing reviews to warn others about poor quality or misrepresented products, while others described wanting to support small or particularly responsive sellers by publicly acknowledging good service. These actions were motivated by a combination of reciprocity ("helping the next person decide") and emotional salience ("it was so good or so bad that I had to say something").

A smaller group of participants, exemplified by one very active reviewer, described systematic post-purchase engagement with community features. This participant reported frequently leaving reviews and uploading photos, partly to earn loyalty points and partly from a sense of fairness, given how much they themselves relied on reviews. Gamified incentives, such as points or badges, were described as helpful nudges for this type of user, although they did not appear sufficient to motivate most low contribution participants to change their behaviour materially.

Overall, these patterns support the theme "Low Post-Purchase Contribution". While community content is central to decision making for almost all participants, the burden of generating this content seems to fall disproportionately on a relatively small subset of active contributors. This imbalance suggests that platforms seeking to sustain high-quality community evidence may need to reduce friction for quick, lightweight contributions and explore more meaningful incentives or prompts that align with users' motivations and constraints.

4.6 Summary of stage-specific roles of community

The findings, summarised in Table 4.1 and Figure 4.7, demonstrate that community features play distinct but interconnected roles across the shopping journey.

In **discovery**, social feeds, influencer content, notifications, and friend recommendations expose users to new products and ideas, but these signals are treated as starting points rather than sufficient justification for purchase. In **decision making**, community evidence in the form of reviews, ratings, user photos, and selected popularity indicators becomes the central engine of evaluation, often determining whether users proceed or abandon a product.

Figure 4.7 situates the main themes **Social Discovery with Analytical Validation**, **Community Evidence as Decision Engine, Authenticity over Marketing, Trust Fragility and Service Dependence, Decision-stage Friction**, and **Low Post-Purchase Contribution along the journey** and in relation to the overarching research question about the role of community in e-commerce shopping journeys.

Figure 4.7 summarizes how the main themes are distributed across the shopping journey stages.

At the **purchase stage**, trust building and trust breaking signals, together with friction created by intrusive engagement mechanisms, shape whether users feel confident enough to complete the transaction. Finally, in the **post-purchase phase**, most participants continue to depend on community content while contributing relatively little themselves, with only a subset of users engaging in active reviewing and sharing.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the empirical findings in relation to the research questions and prior literature, outlines design implications for e-commerce platforms, and reflects on the study's contributions, limitations, and future research directions. The discussion is structured around the main research question and three sub questions introduced in Chapter 1.

5.1 Overview of main findings

The main research question asked: **What is the role of community in e-commerce shopping journeys, and how can its integration enhance trust, engagement, and user experience?** The findings indicate that community features are not marginal add ons but constitute a central decision infrastructure that users rely on across journey stages, with particularly strong influence in discovery and evaluation. Participants described a pattern in which social and algorithmic mechanisms, feeds, influencers, notifications, and friend recommendations spark discovery, but final decisions depend heavily on community evidence such as reviews, ratings, and user photos.

Taken together, the findings show that community features act as a shared decision infrastructure that shoppers rely on to discover options, evaluate products, and manage trust across the journey. Six core themes summarise this role: Social discovery with analytical validation, Community evidence as decision engine, Authenticity over marketing, Trust fragility and service dependence, Decision-stage friction, and Low post-purchase contribution. Together, these themes show that community features both enable and constrain user experience, supporting trust and inspiration when perceived as authentic and well timed, but eroding confidence when they appear manipulative, overwhelming, or disconnected from service quality.

5.2 Answering the sub-questions

5.2.1 SQ1: Design strategies for integrating community

The first sub-question asked: **What design strategies can meaningfully integrate community into e-commerce platforms to create more engaging shopping experiences*?*** The findings show that effective strategies position community features directly at key decision points, prioritise authentic user-generated content, and constrain intrusive engagement elements during comparison and checkout.

First, the prominence and placement of community evidence near critical decision points emerges as essential. Participants habitually scrolled directly to reviews and user photos when evaluating products, implying that these elements should be readily visible and easy to access from product pages, not hidden behind additional clicks or navigation. This aligns with design frameworks that call for integrating social features into commerce flows rather than treating them as separate layers.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of emphasizing authentic user-generated content over promotional material. Users trusted customer photos and detailed, mixed reviews more than polished catalogue images or uniformly positive feedback, suggesting that platforms should give clear visual priority to verified customer media and avoid over editing or overly idealized product imagery. This echoes prior work on the credibility of diverse, realistic user-generated content and the role of visible review diversity in signalling authenticity (Filieri, 2015a).

Third, design strategies should deliberately limit intrusive engagement mechanisms in comparison and checkout stages. Participants described pop-ups, gamified countdowns, and live shopping overlays as sources of friction that distracted from evaluating community evidence and undermined trust. Rather than maximizing short term engagement, platforms should prioritize low friction, focused interfaces when users are reading reviews or finalizing purchases, reserving more attention seeking elements for earlier exploratory moments.

Finally, increasing post-purchase contribution requires design that makes reviewing both easy and meaningful. The prevalence of low and conditional contributors suggests an opportunity for lightweight review prompts, prefilled structures, or selective nudges (for example, targeting users with unusually positive or negative experiences) that respect users' time while still encouraging contributions that sustain the community evidence other shoppers rely on.

5.2.2 SQ2: Community participation across journey stages

The second sub-question asked: **In what ways can community participation support different stages of the shopping journey (discovery, decision making, purchase, and post-purchase)?** The findings extend existing journey literature by detailing how specific community features are used at each stage from a user perspective.

In the **discovery stage**, community participation supports inspiration rather than immediate decision making. Social feeds, influencer content, notifications, friend recommendations, and trending lists expose users to new products and ideas, aligning with prior work that identifies social media and UGC as important discovery channels. However, participants treated these signals as tentative suggestions, moving quickly to validation rather than acting on them directly.

In the **decision-making stage**, community participation becomes central: reviews, ratings, and user photos act as the primary decision engine, helping users compare alternatives, assess fit and realism, and gauge risk. This behaviour supports and nuances earlier findings about the importance of review volume, sentiment, and reviewer identity cues for purchase intention (Filieri, 2015a; Forman et al., 2008) by showing how users actively read and interpret individual reviews, negative signals, and photographic evidence when making choices.

At the **purchase stage**, community participation plays a more complex role. On one hand, social proof signals such as bestseller badges, sold counts, or recent reviews can reassure users and reduce hesitation, consistent with prior work on social proof and trust signals in checkout contexts (Cialdini, 2009). On the other hand, community-styled engagement mechanisms such as live pop-ups and gamified alerts can generate

Decision-stage friction when they appear at the wrong time or in excessive quantities. This highlights the need for stage appropriate calibration of community features rather than homogeneous deployment.

In the **post-purchase stage**, community participation shifts towards contribution and relationship maintenance, but the findings show that most users remain primarily consumers of community content rather than active contributors. A small subset of users create a disproportionate share of reviews and photos, while many others only contribute when experiences are unusually positive or negative. This pattern resonates with literature on community participation roles and 'lurkers' (Kozinets, 2010) and suggests that platforms must design for both consumption and contribution in ways that acknowledge the asymmetry between them.

5.2.3 SQ3: Effects on trust, inspiration, and decision-making

The third sub-question asked: **How do community-driven features influence consumer trust, inspiration, and decision making?** The findings show that these outcomes are intertwined rather than separate: the same community features that inspire exploration also shape trust judgements and structure decision processes.

In terms of **trust**, community features influence both initial expectations and longitudinal perceptions of platforms and sellers. Reviews, ratings, and user photos provide social proof and detailed experiential information, reducing uncertainty and helping users judge whether products and sellers are reliable, in line with prior work on user-generated content and trust (Filieri, 2015a). Participants emphasized that authenticity cues such as realistic photos, mixed review profiles, and visible review volume were particularly important for trusting community content itself, while service experiences with support and delivery affected trust in the platform and sellers more broadly.

Regarding **inspiration**, discovery oriented community features such as feeds, influencer content, and friend recommendations made shopping feel more social and sometimes more impulsive. Several participants described unplanned purchases triggered by community signals or by seeing products repeatedly in social contexts, illustrating how hedonic and social aspects of community participation can create desire beyond utilitarian

needs. However, even in these cases, participants typically sought some form of community evidence before finalizing the purchase, showing that inspiration and validation are closely coupled.

For **decision making**, community features structured both information access and evaluation heuristics. Users routinely prioritized products with higher review counts and slightly lower ratings over products with perfect scores but few reviews, demonstrating a preference for evidence richness over numerical perfection. They also used community content to resolve specific uncertainties (for example, fit, material quality, shipping times) and were willing to abandon products entirely when community signals raised red flags, such as suspicious review patterns or fake looking photos. At the same time, Decision-stage friction created by intrusive community styled elements showed that not all social or engagement-oriented design increases trust or supports good decisions; poorly timed or excessive cues can undermine both.

5.3 Design implications for community-driven shopping journeys

The findings suggest several practical design implications for e-commerce platforms seeking to integrate community in ways that enhance trust, engagement, and user experience. These implications build on the six themes identified in Chapter 4 and follow their stage-specific roles across discovery, decision-making, purchase, and post-purchase.

Prioritize authentic community evidence near decision points. Product pages should make reviews, ratings, and user photos highly visible and easily navigable, reflecting their central role as decision engines. Designers should consider defaulting review views to include recent, detailed, and photo rich contributions, and provide filters that help users quickly locate information relevant to their concerns (for example, size, quality, or delivery).

Elevate verified customer media relative to promotional imagery. Given users preference for realistic photos and mixed reviews, platforms should ensure that customer photos and videos are clearly labelled and visually emphasized, while also avoiding over idealized or heavily edited promotional images that may raise suspicion. Integrating indicators of verification (such as “purchased this item” badges) can further strengthen perceived authenticity.

Calibrate social discovery with clear pathways to validation. Discovery features such as social feeds, influencer integrations, and trending lists should be complemented with straightforward transitions to community evidence, so that users inspired by a product can immediately access reviews and user photos without additional searching. Interfaces that connect discovery modules directly to evidence views may better support the “social discovery with analytical validation” pattern observed in the data.

Reduce decision-stage friction by constraining intrusive engagement elements. Pop-ups, gamified countdowns, and live shopping overlays should be carefully constrained during product comparison and checkout phases, when users are focused on reading reviews and making decisions. Designers can consider limiting such elements to earlier exploration stages or providing user controls for muting or collapsing them, aligning with calls for more ethical and user-centred engagement design in digital commerce.

Expose seller reliability and service quality alongside community content. Because trust depends not only on UGC but also on support and delivery experiences, platforms should make seller reliability indicators such as return policies, delivery performance metrics, and customer service ratings visible near reviews and product information. This can help users form more holistic trust judgements and may prevent situations where strong community evidence is later contradicted by poor service.

Lower barriers to post-purchase contribution and align incentives. To address the imbalance between heavy consumers and limited contributors, platforms should design low friction mechanisms for leaving quick reviews, ratings, or photos, and consider targeted prompts that focus on users with extreme experiences or repeated purchases.

While gamified incentives such as points can motivate some users, the findings suggest that combining such incentives with clear communication about the value of contributions to the community may be more effective. These implications can guide UX and product teams in prioritizing feature changes along the shopping journey and can also inform platform managers and policy makers who define guidelines for community and engagement design.

5.4 Theoretical contributions

This thesis contributes to research on social commerce, customer journeys, and community-driven design in several ways. First, it extends existing social commerce frameworks by providing a stage-specific, user-centred account of how community features are experienced across the online shopping journey. While prior work has identified key feature types such as reviews, ratings, and live shopping and their general effects on trust and purchase intention (Hajli, 2015; Lin et al., 2017), fewer studies have detailed how users navigate and interpret these features at each journey stage, and how discovery, evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase stages are linked through community participation (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Omar & Sulaiman, 2023).

Second, the findings contribute to understanding the nuanced role of authenticity in community design. By showing how users actively interpret review diversity, photo realism, and suspicious patterns, the study complements quantitative research on review sentiment and volume with a qualitative perspective on how users judge authenticity and respond to perceived manipulation. This supports emerging arguments in e-commerce and tourism research that simply increasing the volume or positivity of UGC is insufficient; perceived authenticity and transparency are equally critical (Bugshan & Attar, 2020; Filieri, 2015a).

Third, the study connects literature on engagement design and digital well-being to concrete e-commerce contexts by illustrating how decision-stage friction arises when engagement-maximising features conflict with users' evaluation tasks. This adds a user-centred viewpoint to debates about ethical design in digital platforms, emphasizing

that not all social or gamified features are beneficial and that their timing and placement strongly condition their impact on trust and experience.

Finally, the identification of “Low Post-Purchase Contribution” as a theme and its alignment with differentiated community participation roles extends work on lurkers and active contributors into the context of everyday e-commerce. By highlighting the dependency of most shoppers on a relatively small group of reviewers, the thesis underscores the importance of designing sustainable contribution as well as consumption (Hajli, 2015; Kozinets, 2010; W. Zhang & Huang, 2024)

5.5 Limitations and future research

As a qualitative, interview-based study, this thesis has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample size of 15 participants, while sufficient for exploratory thematic analysis, does not allow for statistical generalization to all e-commerce users, and the participants were recruited primarily from specific geographic and social contexts, which may limit transferability to other regions or demographics. The data are based on self-reported experiences and retrospective accounts, introducing potential recall bias and discrepancies between reported and actual behavior.

Moreover, the study focuses solely on shoppers and does not include perspectives from platform designers, product managers, or data from clickstream analytics, which could offer additional insight into how community features are implemented and how they perform at scale. The research also concentrates on a subset of platform types, notably large marketplaces such as Temu, Shein, and Daraz and curated platforms such as Zalando, so further work is needed to examine whether similar patterns hold in other models such as peer-to-peer marketplaces, niche community platforms, or emerging social commerce ecosystems.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. First, larger scale quantitative studies and experiments, such as A/B tests of interface variants, could

evaluate the effects of specific design interventions derived from this thesis, for example repositioning reviews closer to the call to action, changing the prominence of customer photos, or reducing decision-stage pop-ups, on trust and conversion metrics. Second, mixed-methods studies combining interviews, behavioural logs, and eye-tracking could provide richer insight into how users navigate community features in real time and how they allocate attention across different signals.

Third, research including designers and platform stakeholders could explore organizational and technical constraints that shape community feature integration, bridging the gap between user-centred findings and implementation realities.

Finally, future work could examine ethical and well-being aspects of community-driven shopping more explicitly, for example by investigating how users perceive fairness, manipulation, and control in social commerce interfaces, and by developing design principles that balance engagement with autonomy and long-term trust.

Overall, despite these limitations, the study provides a grounded, HTI-oriented account of how community features shape e-commerce shopping journeys and offers actionable design implications for making community an integral, trustworthy, and user-centred part of online shopping experiences.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction (2 mins): “Thank you for participating. This 10–20 minute interview explores how community features shape your e-commerce shopping. The interview will be audio recorded with your consent and your responses will be anonymous. You can skip any question and stop at any time. Do you have any questions before we start? "

1. Which e-commerce platforms do you shop on most often (e.g., Shein, Temu, Zalando, Daraz)?
   How often do you shop online?
   (Reasoning: Establishes shopping habits and platform relevance.)
2. How do you usually discover new products or ideas on these platforms? (E.g., homepage feeds, social media shares, live shopping, trending lists, friend recommendations.)
   (Reasoning: Maps community role in discovery.)
3. A) What community-related features help you find inspiring or relevant products? (For example, user photos, influencer content, shared wishlists, group buying, live streams.)
   (Reasoning: Identifies helpful inspiration features; links to design strategies.)

   B) Are there any community related features that make discovery more difficult or distracting for you?
   Could you give an example?
   (Reasoning: Identifies hindering features and pain points.)

4. When comparing products or deciding what to buy, which community elements do you use most (e.g., reviews/ratings, Q&A, user-generated photos/videos, forums)?
   (Reasoning: Probes evaluation-stage support.)
5. Can you describe a recent time when peer content (such as reviews, Q&A answers, or discussions) strongly influenced your choice?
   When was this, and what happened? What made that content feel trustworthy or

untrustworthy?
(Reasoning: Captures trust/decision examples.)

6. Right before you decide to buy, what community-related signals reassure you or push you towards completing the purchase?
   (For example, “X people bought this,” recent reviews, live chat, popularity indicators.)
   Can you think of a specific purchase where this happened?
   (Reasoning: Examines final-moment trust boosters with examples.)
7. A) After buying, do you interact with community features (for example, leaving reviews, joining groups, sharing on social media, using resale or exchange features)?

   B) When was the last time you did this, and what motivated or discouraged you?
   (Reasoning: Explores retention, advocacy, and barriers through concrete cases.)

8. A) How do community features affect your trust in a platform or in specific products?
   (Reasoning: Focuses on trust impact.)

   B) Do community features affect your enjoyment of shopping?
   (Reasoning: Focuses on enjoyment/engagement.)

   C) Do community features influence how likely you are to return to a platform and shop again?
   (Reasoning: Focuses on repeat use and loyalty.)

9. A) Have community features ever inspired you to make an unplanned purchase? *(Reasoning: Checks for inspiration/impulse buying.)*

B) What kind of features were involved, and can you give an example of such a purchase? *(Reasoning: Adds detail and example; clarifies “what kind of features”.)*

C) In general, do community features make shopping feel more social or fun for you?
(Reasoning: Gauges hedonic and social aspects separately.)

"Do you want to share anything else? Thank you!"

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of the Study

Designing Community-Driven Shopping Journeys in E-Commerce

Researcher

Emon Datta, Human-Technology Interaction, Computing Sciences and Electrical Engineering, Tampere University

Supervisor

Jari Varsaluoma, University Lecturer, Tampere University

1.Purpose of the Study

You are invited to take part in a study about how community features (such as reviews, ratings, Q&A, live shopping, and social feeds) shape people's online shopping journeys on e-commerce platforms. The aim is to understand how these features affect discovery, decision-making, purchase, post-purchase experiences, and feelings of trust and engagement.

2.What Participation Involves

If you agree to participate:

- You will take part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 10–20 minutes.
- The interview will be conducted online (Zoom) at a time that suits you.
- The interview will be audio-recorded to allow accurate transcription and analysis.

You can skip any question you do not want to answer.

3. Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. If you withdraw, you can request that your data (audio and

transcript) be deleted up until the point when analysis and anonymisation are completed.

4.Confidentiality and Data Handling

- Your name and any other direct identifiers will not appear in the thesis or any publications.
- A pseudonym will be used instead of your real name.
- No platform-specific usernames, order numbers, or other identifying details will be collected.
- Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected drive at Tampere University, accessible only to the researcher and supervisor.
- Data will be used only for this master's thesis and possible related academic outputs.

5. Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks beyond those of everyday online communication. You will not receive direct financial compensation, but your participation may help improve the understanding and design of community features in e-commerce platforms.

6. Contact Information

For questions about the study or participation, please contact:

- Researcher: Emon Datta
- Supervisor: **Jari Varsaluoma**

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