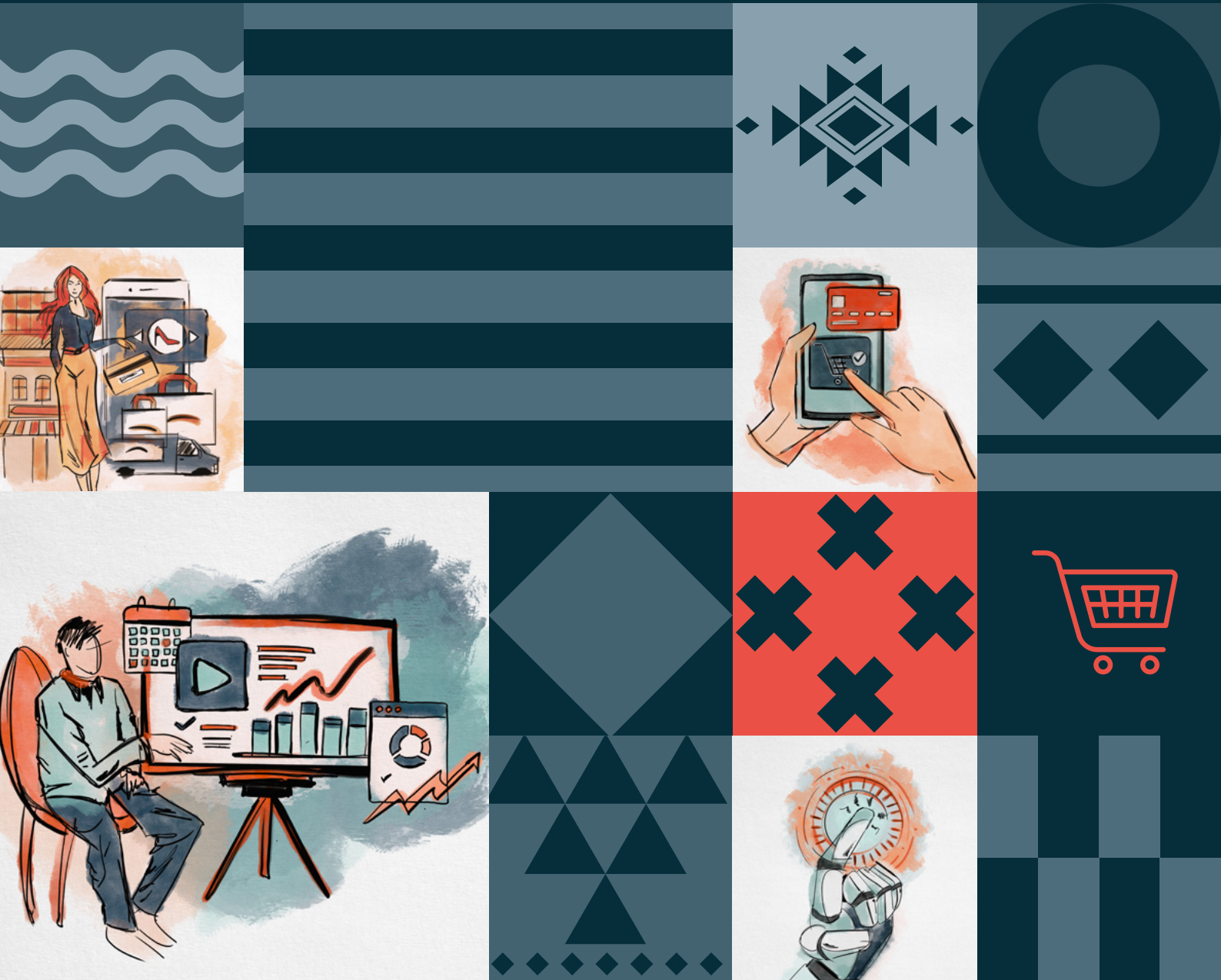




Saudi Arabia's Fashion Frontier: eCommerce's evolution and AI adoption



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Executive Summary

Developing Saudi Arabia's digital economy is a Vision 2030 strategic imperative¹. Through the National Transformation Program, Saudi Arabia seeks to derive 19.2% of GDP from the digital economy by 2025². This White Paper analyses the most recent global trends in the fashion eCommerce ecosystem, quantifies Saudi Arabia's fashion eCommerce opportunity and identifies key support levers to accelerate growth. The analysis is derived from public fashion retailers' integrated annual reports, investor announcements, academic literature, market intelligence data, an online survey and stakeholder interviews.

Global fashion eCommerce revenue is projected to reach US\$847 billion in 2027, accounting for one in every five fashion purchases³. The rapid digitalization of shopping habits, hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic, has revolutionized the manner in which consumers find, buy, and interact with fashion. This evolution is reshaping supply chains, enhancing customer experiences and enabling new forms of market access for both established brands and emerging designers. According to Morgan Stanley, the "growth of digital commerce represents a permanent change in how people shop"⁴. While physical stores will continue to represent an essential sales channel for fashion brands, eCommerce channels will likely drive future growth. This trend is substantiated

by a 2023 Euromonitor International Voice of the Consumer survey that found that 60% of consumers start their shopping journey online.

A review of major publicly listed retailers' annual reports emphasizes how consumers actively seek a hybrid approach to shopping (termed "omnichannel"). This approach encompasses the ease of online engagements with the assurance of the personal, in-store experience. Brands that have a physical presence as well as an online presence are best placed to reach their full sales potential, as only 26% of consumers are comfortable buying from companies that offer products online only⁵. Additionally, globally competitive fashion brands are investing in eCommerce platforms which provide deeper analytical insights into their customer's purchasing habits. By utilizing big data analytics and Artificial Intelligence (AI), fashion brands can enhance customer experience, strengthen their marketing impact and optimize their supply chain.

Saudi's fashion eCommerce market is predicted to reach US\$4.08 billion by 2027, a 74% growth from 2023's US\$2.34 billion⁶.

The Kingdom is uniquely positioned relative to China, the United States and Europe, who currently are the most prominent eCommerce markets globally. This is due to a much larger

Global fashion eCommerce revenue is projected to reach

US\$847 billion

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proportion of Saudi Arabia's population being under the age of forty, an age group which represent the largest number of online shoppers globally⁷. In Saudi Arabia, 65% of the population is under the age of forty. In China, the United States and Europe, the comparative portions are much lower at 51%, 54%, and 46% respectively⁸.

Globally, Generation Z (born between 1997-2012) and Millennials (born between 1981-1996) are increasingly inspired by online influencers, purchasing products via social media platforms. Termed social shopping,^{9,10} this phenomenon is expected to play an increasingly important role in eCommerce sales globally¹¹. The Kingdom's youthful demographic presents a prime opportunity for mobile commerce (mCommerce) and social shopping growth. For businesses aiming to penetrate this market, it is critical to tailor marketing strategies for smartphone apps and social networks. Success hinges on appealing to Millennial and Gen Z consumers by streamlining the checkout experience and creating genuine, creative content that fosters brand allegiance¹².

This opportunity appears to be well-understood by leaders in the Saudi commercial ecosystem, for example Chalhoub Group, Namshi, Net-A-Porter, Alshaya, Ounass and KOJ. These companies have made investments and established partnerships to broaden their eCommerce reach and deepen AI capabilities. Taffi, an AI-powered fashion shopping platform, has used machine learning, Chat GPT 4, and other generative AI applications to provide its users with styling recommendations based on their preferences, dress occasions and budget¹³. AI-enabled software has demonstrated positive returns for retailers, with basket sizes growing by 66% and purchase conversions increasing by almost seven times¹⁴.

The landscape of Fashion eCommerce is on the verge of substantial transformation, marked by a convergence of evolving consumer needs, heightened online and in-store competition, and the emergence of novel innovations aimed at enhancing digital interfaces, in-store experiences, and supply chain efficiency. The Saudi market, with its rapid growth and unique ecosystem, is poised to play a pivotal role in steering these global shifts.

This White Paper offers an analysis of global eCommerce trends in the fashion sector and a focused exploration of the Saudi market. It emphasizes the imperative for brands to integrate eCommerce as a core strategy rather than as a peripheral aspect. It contends the convergence of digital and physical retail realms demands a re-evaluation of how firms operate in the fashion market, a re-evaluation that includes the skills needed to compete in the growing, dynamic Saudi fashion market.

The paper concludes that it is imperative for ecosystem stakeholders to strategically align their efforts with the evolving needs of eCommerce in the fashion industry through empowering SMEs, enhancing digital skill sets and revolutionizing Kingdom-wide logistics infrastructure.

International eCommerce trends



Fashion's digital revolution: unveiling the origins and evolution of eCommerce in the fashion industry

eCommerce, an abbreviation of the term 'electronic commerce', is defined as the exchange of goods and services, and the transmission of funds and data over the internet¹⁵. eCommerce traditionally refers to business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B) commerce. Following the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1991 and wide adoption of the Internet globally from 1993, eCommerce tracks its origin to a 1994 online transaction of a US\$12.48 CD sold in the United States of America¹⁶. Since this first purchase, eCommerce has evolved from a novel way to sell products to a pivotal channel for brand discovery, marketing, sales and growth. In 1995, Amazon and eBay were founded and by 1996 online sales of products had surpassed US\$1 billion per year¹⁷. The introduction of PayPal in 1998 further streamlined and democratized online payments, while Alibaba, targeting the Chinese market, launched in 1999¹⁸.

Fashion has intertwined with eCommerce throughout its history, spanning the entire spectrum of the fashion pyramid and diverse price points. Luxury fashion products were available online as early as 2000, with Net-a-Porter launching

its website for high-end fashion items. In the early to mid-2000s, fashion eCommerce was primarily web-based, linked to physical stores and accessed through computers. The proliferation of smartphones, particularly the iPhone, catalyzed a transformation in the 2010s with social media platforms such as Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok emerging as influential channels for buying and selling fashion. Euromonitor's 2023 Global Social Media Trends report highlighted that 36% of online consumers aged 18-24 search for brands via social media more often than through traditional search engines such as Google or Yahoo²⁰. This is higher than all other generations, with 25-34-year-olds at 22%, 35-54-year-olds at 21%, and over 55-year-olds at just 6%²¹. Additionally, rather than eCommerce platforms being an online portal linked to a physical store, platforms such as Shein and Temu have shown the potential for 'online-first' or 'online only/ pure-play' fashion brands at a global scale²². While the channels to buy and sell fashion items online have changed over the last three decades, the eCommerce market has continued to grow.

Dressing up the bottom line: navigating fashion eCommerce revenue and trends

Accounting for 1 in 5 sales, online purchasing has become a major component of the global fashion

ecosystem²³. Accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, shopping habits have undergone rapid

digitalization, transforming the way consumers discover, purchase and engage with fashion. This evolution is reshaping supply chains, enhancing customer experiences and enabling new forms of market access for both established brands and emerging designers.

Global fashion eCommerce sales are projected to exceed US\$635 billion in 2023 and reach US\$847 billion by 2027²⁴. Reviewing growth since pre-Covid, this equates to a total growth of 114% from 2019 to 2027 (Figure 1). The share of global fashion purchases made online is expected to increase from 20.8% in 2023 to 24% by 2026²⁵.

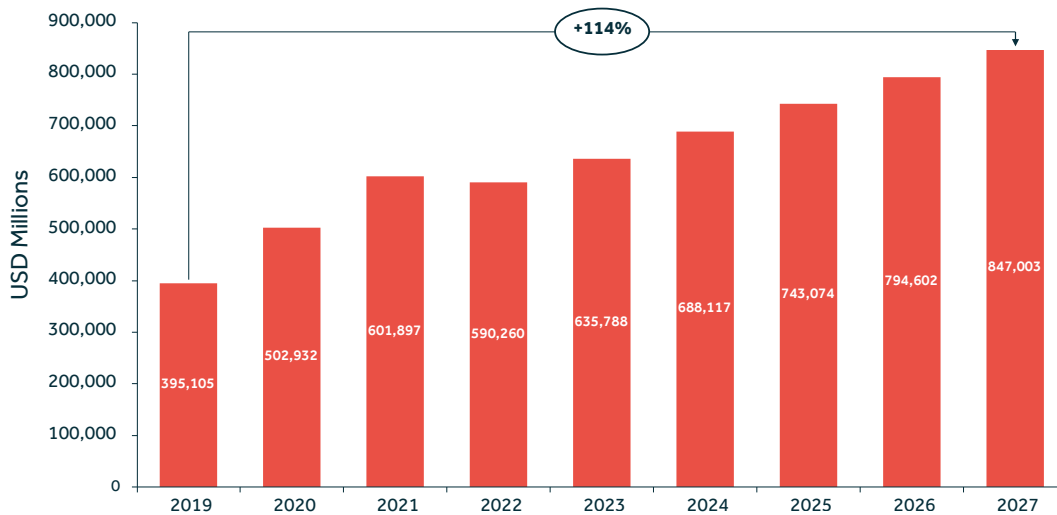


FIGURE 1:
Fashion eCommerce retail value, US\$ millions.

SOURCE: EUROMONITOR (2023)

Online retail sales from 2022 to 2027 are projected to grow most significantly in the Middle East and Africa (15.75%), followed by Latin America (12.2%) and Asia Pacific (9.3%) (Figure 2). Growth is primarily driven by increased internet access in these regions and improved logistics infrastructure, which has improved consumer ability to purchase products online²⁶.

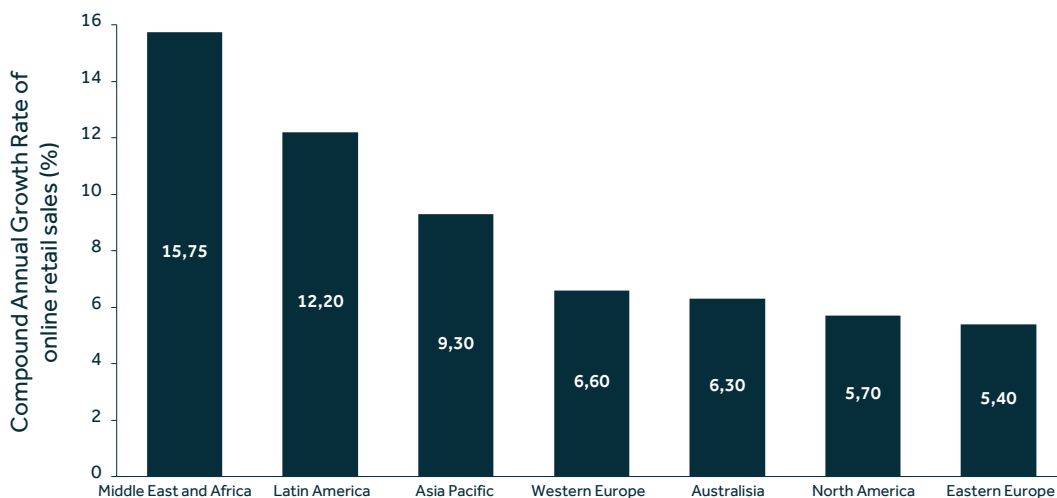


FIGURE 2:
Projected compound annual growth rate of online retail sales, 2022-2027.

SOURCE: EUROMONITOR (2023) DIGITAL CONSUMER. EUROMONITOR PASSPORT.

Fashion eCommerce front-runners: investigating the strategies and drivers behind their global triumph

Leaders in eCommerce comprise a mix of mass fashion retailers and luxury groups such as Inditex, H&M, LVMH and Kering, as well as digital-first firms such as Amazon, ASOS and Boohoo. More recently, the industry has been disrupted by the emergence of Chinese fast fashion brand Shein, valued at US\$100 billion²⁷, which recorded US\$700 million in profits in 2022. Shein is targeting US\$60 billion in total sales by 2025²⁸. Despite rapid growth, Shein has faced competition from eCommerce newcomers such as Temu, a shopping platform and app, launched in 2022²⁹. Typical of any rapidly evolving market channel, fashion eCommerce and its associated supply chain is ripe for further disruption as it grows.

Global luxury giant Kering predicts online sales will grow in importance for the luxury sector, increasing from 21% of its total luxury sales in 2022 to 34% by 2030³⁰. LVMH, owner of luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Dior, and Givenchy, has noted in its latest annual report how improving the quality and productivity of its retail networks and online sales is strategically critical to its future. LVMH Group chairman Bernard Arnault noted the luxury leader's resilience was driven by the group's focus on logistics, digitalization and online stores³¹.

Despite the rapid and continued growth of eCommerce, some analysts note recent rapid growth rates may moderate as consumers return to physical stores following the removal of

pandemic restrictions³². Kering noted their online sales growth is converging with store sales growth³³ due to a rebound in tourism and growth off a low base post-pandemic³⁴. This 'return to the store' has been most keenly seen in the luxury fashion market segment. Research conducted by Bain & Company in 2023 found that 43% of luxury customers consider the physical store their key avenue to discovering products³⁵. Luxury consumers show a continued willingness to prepare wish-lists online, book in-store appointments online, access product information via a digital tag and discover brand history through digital content. However, this is not at the expense of personalized experiences and human interactions at luxury boutique stores³⁶. Evidence suggests the physical store remains critical for the luxury fashion consumer and that this experience is unlikely to be substituted for online shopping in its entirety.

For luxury brands like Kering and LVMH, the recent crash of Farfetch's shares (a decline of over 97%³⁷) points to a longer-term challenge: a drive to seek greater levels of control over their products, brand image and interactions with customers³⁸. Their concerns are tied to various factors, including third-party sellers diluting exclusivity and premium positioning, as well as concerns over counterfeiting, unauthorized sales and discounting, which can pose substantial risks to the brand's reputation with its customer. This has resulted in luxury brands

moving away from third-party sellers like Farfetch toward more personalized experiences to strengthen relationship with customers³⁹, whether through the brand's own online platform or through their physical stores.

A review of the recent annual reports of major publicly listed retail firms emphasizes consumers are actively seeking a hybrid approach to shopping – the ease of online partnered with the assurance of the in-person touch-and-feel of the product. According to Euromonitor's International Voice of the Industry, only 26% of consumers are comfortable purchasing from companies that offer only an online customer service⁴⁰, which indicates that firms need to have a physical presence to fully unlock their online sales potential.

Globally, most shoppers (73%) use multiple channels (online and offline) during their customer journey⁴¹. Importantly, these shoppers also tend to spend more than consumers that only utilize a single channel⁴². Ensuring that customers have a seamless in-store and online shopping experience is critical for maximizing customer satisfaction levels and driving online conversion rates.

Inditex, the global apparel giant and parent company to Zara, generates 22% of its total sales online and is working to improve online customer experience⁴³. Inditex is investing in a new size recommender and real-time personalization model to improve

customer navigation of the website⁴⁴. As stated by Inditex in their latest integrated directors' report, "We will continue to offer the best shopping experience to our customers, both in our stores and on our online platforms⁴⁵."

Even digital-first retailers such as Shein are recognizing the need for an omnichannel strategy, by investing in pop-up stores, and partnering with US brand Forever 21 to expand their physical footprint in malls⁴⁶. The firm is also planning to open thirty

stores in the United Kingdom in 2023 and develop a physical footprint in the Middle East and Europe⁴⁷.

To expand their online presence, retailers and brands must invest in omnichannel implementation. In response to this challenge, Kering emphasizes the need to upskill its workforce to understand and deploy digital tools and platforms, as well as to reskill managers to drive technological adoption and generational shifts⁴⁸. However,

the resources to do so appear to be limited within the broader fashion ecosystem. Euromonitor's International Voice of the Industry study found that 47% of surveyed retailers have budget constraints and 44% are concerned about how to integrate eCommerce into their existing systems⁴⁹. Existing possession internally of the skills necessary to deploy eCommerce strategies was also noted as a challenge by 43% of surveyed firms⁵⁰.

Threads in demand: delving into the fashion categories

Globally, apparel accounts for 62% of fashion's eCommerce revenue, followed by accessories (luggage, watches, and jewelry) at 22%, and footwear at 16%. This ratio is expected to remain relatively unchanged through to 2027⁵¹.

Apparel eCommerce data released by Statista (2023) indicates that shirts and trousers are the two largest subcategories for men's eCommerce apparel, accounting for US\$33 billion and US\$19.64 billion in global eCommerce sales, respectively⁵².

T-shirts are projected to see the highest eCommerce growth rates (50%) over the period 2023-2027 due in part to the continuation of leisurewear and sportswear trends⁵² (Figure 3).

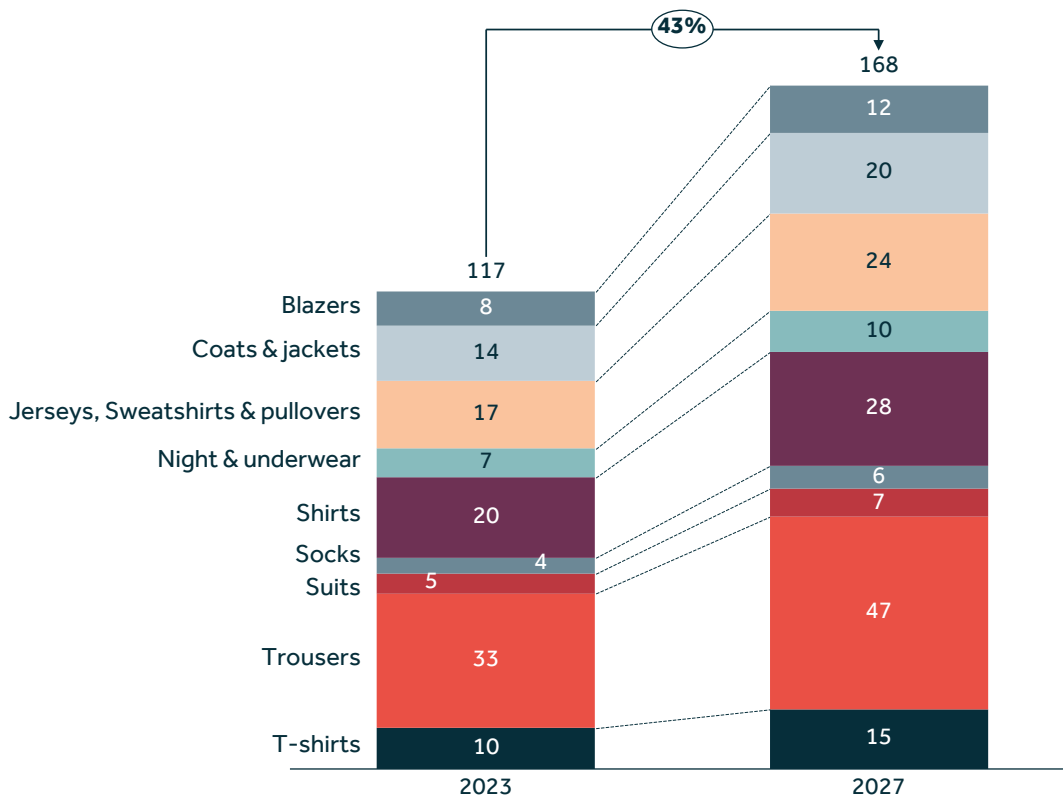


FIGURE 3:
Men's eCommerce apparel categories, US\$ billion, 2023-2027.

SOURCE: STATISTA (2023)

Globally, apparel accounts for **62%** of fashion's eCommerce revenue

For women's eCommerce apparel categories, trousers are the most popular product category sold online at US\$39 billion globally⁵⁴. Second are jerseys, sweatshirts & pullovers at US\$34, followed by dresses & skirts at US\$28 billion⁵⁵. 'Tights and leggings

are projected to see the largest eCommerce sales growth, at 55% from 2023 to 2027⁵⁶. Again, this appears to be driven by the rise in leisurewear, sports attire and shapewear. However, it is worth noting that this is off a low base of US\$3 billion⁵⁷.

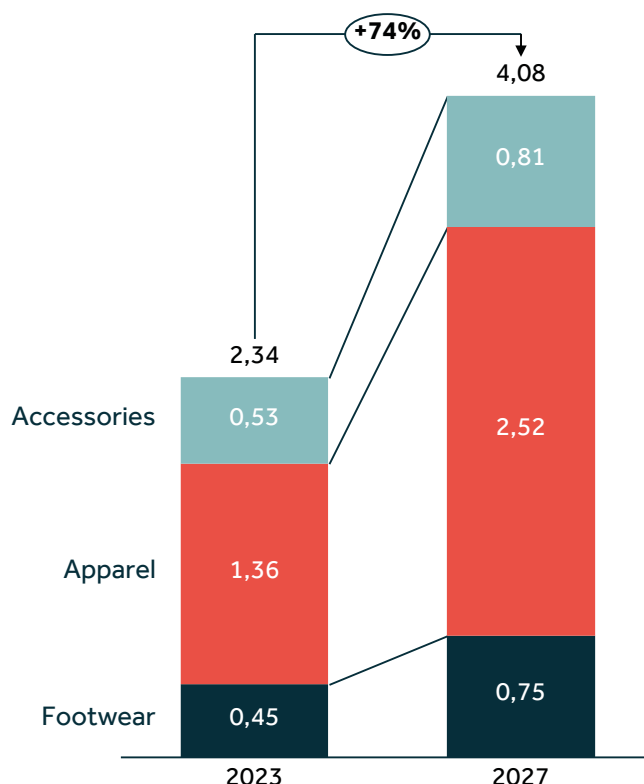


FIGURE 4:
Women's eCommerce apparel categories, US\$ billion, 2023-2027.

SOURCE: STATISTA (2023)

For both men and women, suits appear to be the least popular item to buy online, with eCommerce revenue valued at US\$5 billion⁵⁸ for men and US\$2 billion⁵⁹ in 2023. This trend can, in part, be attributed to suits being considered investment pieces, with a strong emphasis on tailoring, which often require in-store fittings.

Age and style: mapping the landscape of fashion eCommerce adoption across generations and categories

Both Millennials (born between 1981-1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997-2012) are likely to purchase fashion from a social media platform, with 82% of Millennial shoppers and 52% of Generation Z shoppers purchasing fashion online in 2022⁶⁰.

While there is limited available data to segment global online shopping by age and product category, 2023 research from First Insight found the majority of Generation Z consumers would be willing to pay more for sustainable products. Generation Z are also more likely to support brands that align with their world views⁶¹.

Style in flux: a comparative analysis of fashion eCommerce landscapes before and after Covid-19

The easing of Covid-19 social engagement restrictions suggested consumers would return to old patterns of shopping, rejecting online platforms for physical stores. However, global investments into eCommerce have continued to increase significantly - by 47% from 2020 - with UNCTAD reporting that US\$22.4 billion was invested into greenfield eCommerce projects globally in 2022⁶². Morgan Stanley notes "growth of digital commerce represents a permanent change in how people shop"⁶³. While physical stores will continue to represent an important sales channel for fashion brands, future growth is likely to be driven by a range of eCommerce channels.

Click to cart: unraveling the motivations behind online purchase decisions

When choosing to purchase online or at a physical store, consumers are evaluating what is most important to them. A 2023 Euromonitor International Voice of the Consumer survey highlighted that customers demand convenience and transparency in their purchasing decisions. The survey noted that the ability to buy products at any time, from anywhere, as well as to compare and review prices were key purchasing considerations⁶⁴. For 60% of the survey respondents, shopping journeys now start with online platforms. These online platforms expose the respondents to brands and products, while simultaneously



allowing them to search through product catalogues and compare prices before buying, either in-store or online⁶⁵. Given 25% of the respondents in the

study expected to decrease their spending on clothing and footwear in 2023, the ability to price compare was deemed of critical value to consumers⁶⁶.

The game-changing influence of AI in fashion eCommerce

Artificial intelligence^a investment has increased across the fashion ecosystem⁶⁷. Its application in eCommerce has varied in the past 5 years, highlighting three key avenues of use: customer experience enhancement, marketing and supply chain optimization.



- **Customer experience enhancement:** AI models can be used to elevate the consumer's shopping experience by creating a personalized online consumer journey. Offers are then based on individual consumer profiles while AI-enabled virtual assistants provide consumers with advanced consumer-support during and post online shopping⁶⁸. AI-based visual search technology is also driving greater omnichannel engagements, with consumers able to take a photo of a physical product and quickly search for it online⁶⁹.
- **Marketing:** Retailers have deployed AI applications to identify and predict trends. This is based on the high volume of data generated from online platform engagements⁷⁰. AI supports personalized marketing content across social media platforms, while experimenting with sales descriptions to maximize customer impact and convert interest into purchases.
- **Supply chain optimization:** Given the critical role of speed in eCommerce delivery, AI supports improved logistics for brands, optimizing supply delivery routes as well as inventory locations and levels based on real-time data⁷¹. This is especially critical for same day deliveries.

From large established retailers to emerging brands, firms across the fashion ecosystem have a major incentive to effectively develop and deploy an omnichannel strategy enabled by Artificial Intelligence. Effective deployment will better position firms to earn a share of the US\$847 billion fashion eCommerce market by 2027.

Unlocking the Fashion eCommerce Opportunity in Saudi Arabia

Developing Saudi Arabia's digital economy is a strategic imperative in the Kingdom's Vision 2030, a blueprint for a more diverse economy⁷².

Through the National Transformation Program, the Kingdom aims to derive 19.2% of its GDP from the digital economy by 2025⁷³. The eCommerce sector is closely interconnected with other sectors such as logistics. As eCommerce grows, these other sectors

will also experience increased investments, facilitating more job opportunities⁷⁴, driving a positive impact on Saudi Arabia's economy.

Metrics of style: measuring the extent of the Kingdom's fashion eCommerce opportunity

Saudi's fashion eCommerce market is predicted to reach US\$4.08 billion by 2027, a 74% growth from 2023's US\$2.34 billion⁷⁵. The majority of fashion eCommerce sales are driven by apparel, which in 2023 was valued at US\$1.36 billion⁷⁶.

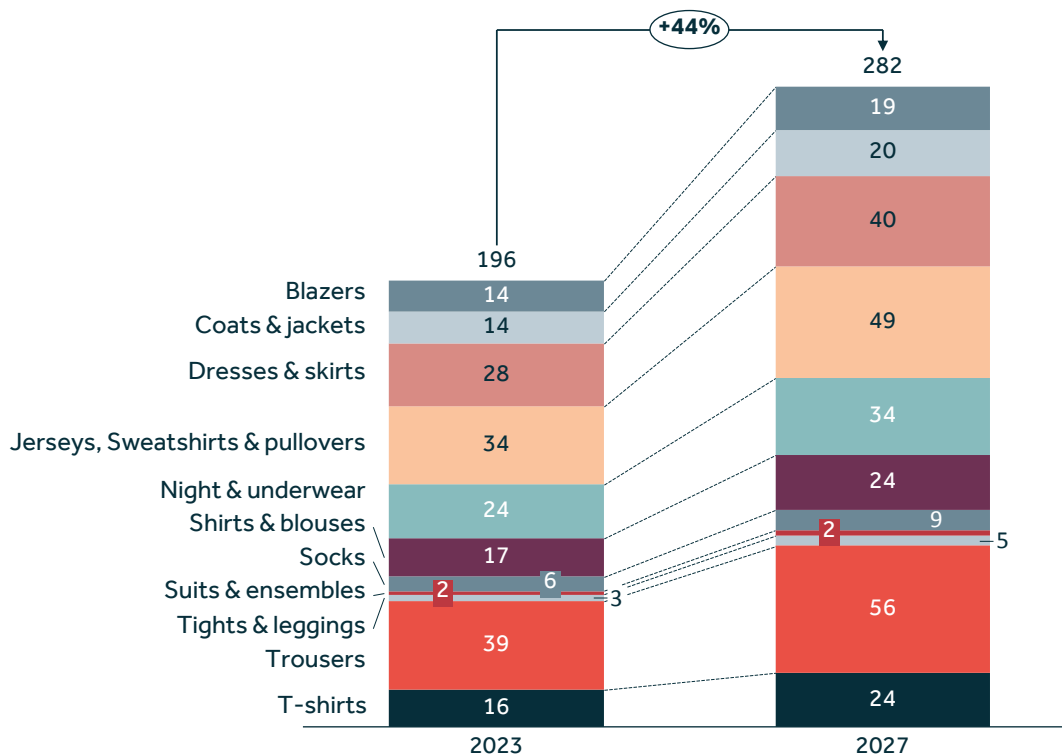


FIGURE 5: Saudi Arabia fashion eCommerce market, in US\$m, 2023 to 2027.

SOURCE: STATISTA (2023)

Fashion unboxed: a comprehensive breakdown of eCommerce market by product categories

Women's apparel was valued at **US\$647 million**⁷⁷ in 2023, compared to men's apparel, which was valued at **US\$357 million**⁷⁸

Aligned with global trends, women's apparel has a larger eCommerce presence than men's apparel. Women's apparel was valued at US\$647 million⁷⁷ in 2023, compared to men's apparel, which was valued at US\$357 million⁷⁸ (Figure 6). This is a large divide when compared to global trends, which may indicate that online men's apparel channels may be under-explored locally.

Delving further into apparel (Figure 6), women's eCommerce apparel is dominated by jerseys, sweatshirts and pullovers, a broad category which includes all knitwear, sweatshirts, jerseys and sweaters for women that are

usually worn as the outermost layer of clothing⁷⁹. Given this broad definition, this category may also include abayas, and accounts for 22% of Saudi's eCommerce market in 2023⁸⁰. Nightwear and underwear are the second largest category, valued at US\$90 million⁸¹.

For men, jerseys, sweatshirts and pullovers are also the largest category at US\$87 million. This category includes all knitwear, sweatshirts, jerseys and sweaters⁸² and includes products such as hoodies. The second largest apparel category is shirts at US\$75 million, which includes traditional wear such as thobes⁸³.

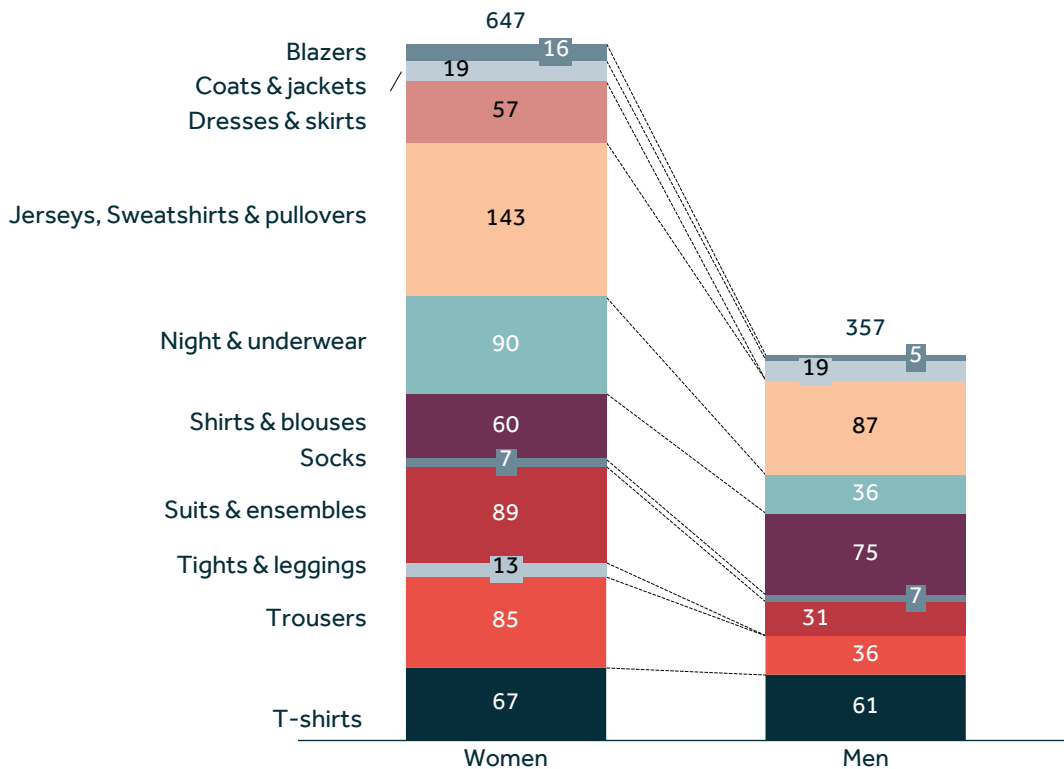


FIGURE 6: Apparel eCommerce subcategories, in US\$m, 2023.

SOURCE: STATISTA (2023)⁸⁴

A comparative analysis of online fashion sales and brick-and-mortar growth

A full 74% of fashion sales are still expected to take place in physical stores in Saudi Arabia by 2027 (Figure 7).

This suggests shoppers in Saudi Arabia will continue to value in-store purchases more than the average global shopper. Saudi Arabia's state of the art shopping malls are expected to continue

to play an important role in fashion retail. However, retailers are increasingly likely to create immersive in-store shopping experiences to amplify their brands, as opposed to simply having brick-and-mortar stores⁸⁵. Shopping malls are evolving into leisure and entertainment destinations, with fashion brands aligning their value

offer with this development⁸⁶. Saudi Arabia remains in a strong position to cater for physical store experiences, with many innovative retail construction projects underway across the Kingdom^{87,88,89}. This will enable new and existing brands to create or maintain their omni-channel presence, which is critical for retail in the future⁹⁰.

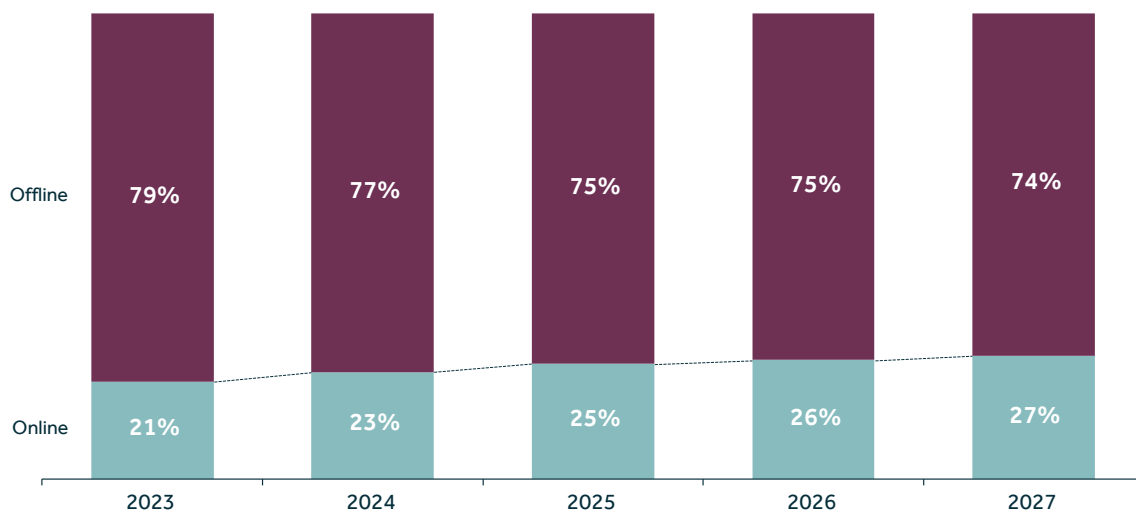


FIGURE 7:
Online vs offline fashion sales in Saudi Arabia 2023 to 2027.

SOURCE: STATISTA (2023)⁹¹

Brands weighing their investment between online and physical sales channels should consider a strategy that doesn't exclusively favour one over the other. It will be important for new brands to have an online presence first,

given that this is where most consumers start their shopping journey⁹². However, for brands selling luxury products, a physical store presence is critical given the customer's desire for an immersive shopping experience.

74%
of fashion sales are still expected to take place in physical stores in Saudi Arabia by 2027

Is mCommerce and social shopping the future of eCommerce in Saudi Arabia?

The percentage of Saudis with smart phones is high (98% in 2022)⁹³, well beyond the Middle East and North Africa average (MENA, 76%)⁹⁴ and above the global average (68%)⁹⁵. This suggests a considerable market for commerce via mobile phone applications (mCommerce). In Saudi Arabia however, this remains a relatively untapped opportunity, with only 39% of all eCommerce sales generated through mobile phones in 2023⁹⁶. This percentage is lower than the global average of 59% in 2022⁹⁷, as well as the average for MENA

(47%)⁹⁸. The full mCommerce market in Saudi Arabia is projected to grow by a CAGR of 26% from 2023 to 2027; or from US\$4.6 billion to US\$11.5 billion (Figure 8). If fashion continues to account for at least 18% of all eCommerce sales in the Kingdom, mCommerce fashion sales would be valued at US\$2.1 billion by 2027.

Millennials and Gen Z shoppers are the biggest participants in mCommerce globally, with these two generations increasingly purchasing online through

social media platforms, often inspired by influencers (“social shopping”)⁹⁹. Saudi Arabia, with its young population, is well positioned for mCommerce and social shopping. Adapting marketing for mobile phone applications and social media platforms, while considering factors which positively influence Millennial and Gen Z shoppers, will be key to tapping into this market. This includes easy check-out processes and authentic, innovative content that develops brand loyalty¹⁰⁰.

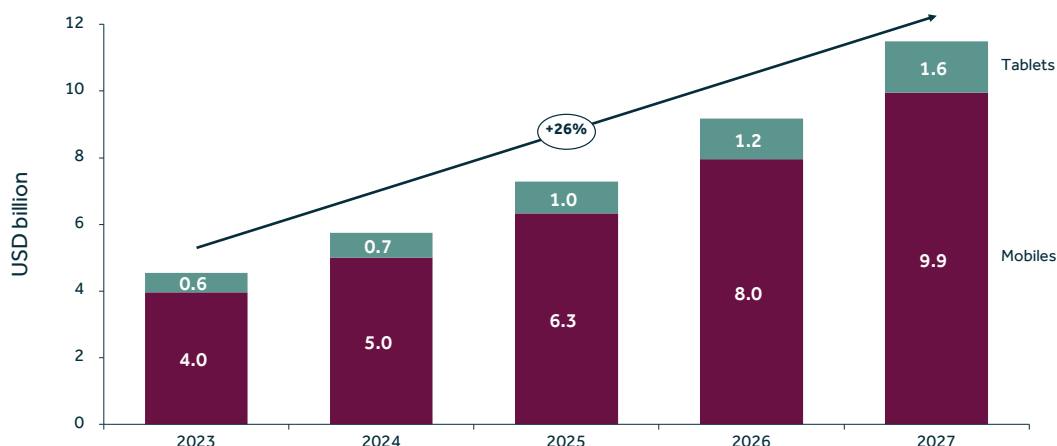


FIGURE 8: Saudi Arabia mCommerce retail value by electronic device from 2023 to 2027.

SOURCE: EUROMONITOR (2023)

The key players in eCommerce in the Kingdom

Closely following the global fashion eCommerce trend, Saudi Arabia is taking the next step into Artificial Intelligence. A review of seven retailers operating in Saudi Arabia - Chalhoub Group, Kamal Osman Jamjoom, Cenomi Group, Alshaya Group, Namshi, Ounass and Net-A-Porter - highlights the extent to which firms are investing resources into the eCommerce revolution.

Entity	Presence	Brands
Chalhoub group	Omni-channel	Eight owned-brands and over 300 international brands in the luxury, beauty, fashion, and art de vivre categories. More recently, the Group expanded its expertise into new categories of luxury watches, jewellery, and eyewear.
Kamal Osman Jamjoom (KOJ)	Omni-channel	In-house fashion brands including Nayomi, Mikyajy, Dream, Moda, Mihyar.
Cenomi Group	Omni-channel	95 global brands including Zara, Mango, Gap, and Estee Lauder.
Alshaya Group	Physical online (online platform launch was expected in 2023)	70 brands that include H&M, NEXT, Victoria's Secret, Jo Malone, and Foot Locker.
Namshi (Noon Group) ¹⁰¹	Pure-play (online only)	800 brands including Nike, Adidas, Lacoste, Calvin Klein, H&M and Mango.
Ounass	Pure-play (online only)	300 luxury brands including Dolce & Gabbana, Saint Laurent, and Valentino Garavani.
Net-A-Porter	Pure-play (online only)	Over 800 brands including Gucci, Chloe, Balenciaga, Prada and Stella McCartney.

TABLE 1:
Summary of retail groups, 2023.

Chalhoub Group considers its strategic partnership with the General Authority for Civil Aviation (GACA) and a planned fulfilment center in Riyadh's Special Integrated Logistics Zone (SILZ) as pivotal steps in enhancing the Group's omnichannel distribution capabilities. Amit Keswani, Chief Omnichannel Officer explains: "Omnichannel is more than a strategy; it's an ethos. Our commitment to an integrated customer journey—from browsing and purchase to delivery and aftercare—is fundamental in driving the Group's efforts in luxury eCommerce and retail across the region¹⁰²." The group

is leveraging data analytics to personalize the customer experience across all channels using insights from AI to tailor product recommendations and marketing campaigns. Mohammed Aldabbagh, Managing Director in Saudi Arabia, says: "In our pursuit of retail excellence within the Kingdom, we embraced the digital transformation with a clear vision: to merge the luxury of choice and the convenience of technology for our customers in Saudi Arabia. Our commitment is to elevate the omnichannel experience, to cater to our customers through all touchpoints, to delight, exhilarate and inspire them."

Kamal Osman Jamjoom has made several 'transformational investments' in inventory and logistics infrastructure that have enabled the company to advance its eCommerce capabilities. These include reducing customs processing times, providing a more responsive online customer service, and expanding last-mile delivery capability¹⁰³.

Cenomi manages 30 mono-brand websites which host millions of visitors each month¹⁰⁴. It is set to launch its own eCommerce platform (online and app-based) selling products from both its own brands and others¹⁰⁵. To overcome logistical challenges of delivery and

storage, the group is building a technology hub in Riyadh and has identified the possibility of using vacant space in existing shopping malls as micro-fulfilment centres where customers can collect their orders¹⁰⁶.

Namshi has an established presence in Saudi Arabia, with the country contributing over 70% of its total sales¹⁰⁷. Its success can be partly attributed to the continued demand for Cash-on-Delivery services in the Kingdom¹⁰⁸. Namshi's growth has been driven by promoting online shopping via social media, using customer-created content on its online social media platforms and by using campaigns to raise awareness about the brand to find new customers¹⁰⁹. According to Namshi, adapting to the unique challenges and preferences of the Middle Eastern market early on allowed the company to stay relevant and competitive as the eCommerce landscape evolved.

Ounass is a luxury fashion online retailer that is popular in Saudi Arabia, based in Dubai. The retailer showcases local talent, offering 'Local Labels' that allow shoppers to identify and support over 100 designers from the Middle East. One of the convenient features offered to Saudi customers is a three-hour delivery commitment in Riyadh. In 2022, the retailer was ranked 5th in the fashion market in Saudi Arabia, growing 56% year-on-year in 2022¹¹⁰. This growth was tied to the use of AI, with the company leveraging automatically generated, tailor-made adverts in search engines based on consumer search queries and real-time product information from the company's available inventory¹¹¹.

The world's largest online luxury fashion retailer Net-A-Porter is a newcomer to the Middle Eastern market, having only established a presence in the region in 2021. Identifying the value that integrating technology can have on business growth, the company has invested over US\$500 million in technology¹¹². Investments have included developing AI tools to provide tailor-made suggestions to the personal shoppers of high-value clients, based on previous purchases and personal tastes¹¹³. Investments have also been focused on reviving and fine-tuning artisanal offerings. This process has been undertaken by creating an AI tool that gathers data on historical best-selling items to guide the design of future products with a high likelihood of retail success¹¹⁴. Net-A-Porter have also identified social media's importance in connecting with younger consumers¹¹⁵.

The investment into eCommerce infrastructure and AI-enabled technologies is not only occurring in retail companies. Platform service providers such as Makane (makane.com) and Salla (salla.com) empower businesses to establish, operate and manage their online stores. These platform service providers offer users shipping and delivery support, as well as access to financial, marketing and data analytics tools. For smaller businesses with limited capacity to develop their own eCommerce platform, opportunities exist to collaborate with these service providers to develop their own online presence efficiently.

Taffi, an AI-powered fashion shopping platform, has used machine learning, Chat GPT

4 and other generative AI applications to provide users with styling recommendations based on the user's preferences, dress occasions and budget¹¹⁶. Founded in 2021 by Shahad Geoffrey and Pradeep Bisht, Taffi has expanded their software services to online stores Zivel, Masion Orient and Beyond Label. The AI-enabled software has demonstrated positive returns for retailers, with basket sizes growing by 66% and purchase conversions by almost seven times¹¹⁷. Taffi has launched an additional feature, "Amira", which directly connects to a retailer's online inventory database to show stock availability in real time¹¹⁸. Currently integrated into 15 online stores in Saudi Arabia and Dubai, the application gathers data from 20 000 looks created by stylists and recommends options to customers based on their physical attributes, lifestyle, profession and fashion style¹¹⁹.

Key social media platforms include Instagram, Facebook as well as TikTok Shop, which launched in the Kingdom in 2023 and globally has reached over US\$10 billion in revenue in 2023¹²⁰.

Navigating the eCommerce Horizon for the Top 100 Saudi Brands - Present and Future Perspectives



Voices in data: analyzing survey responses for in-depth insights

A 2023 survey of 15 Saudi 100 brands^b companies assessed the current and forecasted rate of fashion eCommerce uptake to understand opportunities and challenges the brands currently face with eCommerce adoption. The survey found that 93% of the brands aim to increase their online sales in the next three years. On average, respondents anticipated that 66% of their revenue will be generated from eCommerce sales by 2026. This would represent a growth of 67% on 2023 sales levels. In preparation for this major change, the brands noted a high rate of eCommerce readiness. On a scoring system of 0 'not ready at all' to 10 (extremely ready), the brands scored themselves at an average of 8.5.

Almost all brands were positive about the eCommerce opportunity, noting 'a youthful population with an orientation towards eCommerce' and the 'relative ease of shopping online without trading hour limitations' as indicative reasons for their positive sentiment. The marketing cost was noted as a potential hurdle to realizing eCommerce opportunities, while most brands cited delivery and return logistics as the major challenge to their eCommerce success in the Kingdom (Figure 9). Other challenges identified were after-sales service expectations and competition with larger online retailers. Overall, the positive sentiment expressed by the Saudi 100 brands represented provides an indication of confidence by local brands in the eCommerce growth opportunity in the Kingdom.

^b Saudi 100 brands is a year-long brand mentorship program developed by the Saudi Fashion Commission

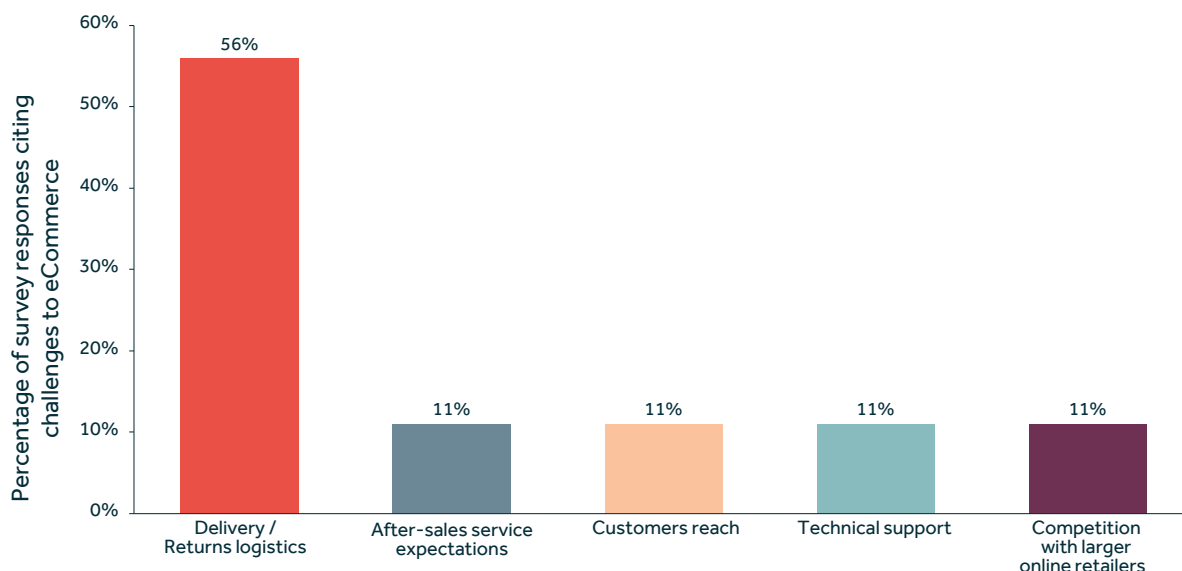


FIGURE 9:
Challenges facing Saudi 100 Brands eCommerce in realizing their full potential.

SOURCE: SAUDI 100 BRAND SURVEY, N=15

Strategies for emerging local fashion brands to flourish in eCommerce

Type of product is a principal factor when building an eCommerce strategy. As discussed in the global chapter, customers tend to prefer physical shopping for suits and luxury products. However, regardless of the type of product, consumers are increasingly engaging online to discover and research brands.

58% of surveyed retail professionals indicated an intent to invest in ensuring consumers can directly purchase from social media channels while more than half indicated planned investment into content sharing via livestreaming and virtual events¹²¹. Given 60.1% of internet users in Saudi Arabia use social media to research brands, local fashion brands would be wise to invest in structures that enable this aspect of the customer journey¹²².

Additionally, fashion brands should ensure their online presence, whether via social media or traditional websites,

supports easy engagement for customers. This includes access to basic information such as ensuring items have good descriptions, clear size measurements, improved payment options (Apple Pay was identified as a preferred option) and a website that is mobile-friendly.

To capitalize on the eCommerce opportunity local brands will need to work closely with their logistics service providers, as delivery and returns logistics was the most cited challenge for Saudi designers. 55.9% of internet users aged 16-64 identified free delivery as a driver for online purchasing in Saudi Arabia, while next day delivery and an easy returns policy were also identified as important to customers. Local brands should leverage these drivers to differentiate their offering¹²³.

Opportunities for upskilling are significant within Saudi Arabia, with brands able to access a wide range of digital skills courses

through public entities such as the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology's Future Skills Program¹²⁴, Women Empowerment Program in Technology, Think Tech Initiative, eCommerce Boot Camps¹²⁵ and a new academy ('Amazon Academy') which is understood to be the largest of its kind in the Middle East¹²⁶. Saudi brands can also take advantage of the Saudi Small and Medium Enterprises General Authority's (Monsha'at) eCommerce tour programme, launched in September 2023, which supports owners to adopt eCommerce within their business¹²⁷. The programme will reach 14 cities in the Kingdom from 2023 to 2024 to enable the uptake of eCommerce¹²⁸. Partners on the tour included organizations involved in payment gateways, logistics, online security and cloud data storage. The tours are aimed particularly at smaller stores who require access to service providers that can support them to transition toward eCommerce offerings.

Saudi Arabia's Preparations for the eCommerce Renaissance

Incentives propelling fashion businesses into the digital realm

in 2021 the Kingdom had the world's second best 5G network

The government of Saudi Arabia is supporting the development of a thriving eCommerce industry through its Vision 2030 goals and National Transformation Program. In preparation for the anticipated surge in eCommerce uptake, Saudi Arabia is implementing new eCommerce laws^e and associated trade policies, while simultaneously supporting the development of technical and logistical infrastructure to create an enabling environment for eCommerce^{129,130}. Technology

infrastructure in the country is already one of the best in the world: in 2021 the Kingdom had the world's second best 5G network and was ranked 2nd globally in the 2023 World Competitiveness Yearbook global Cybersecurity Index¹³¹. Saudi Arabia has also quickly issued licenses for new delivery applications and parcel delivery companies and has focused on hastening customs clearance¹³². These proactive interventions will support both established and emerging brands.

Convenience at every click: the ideal payment and delivery mix for Saudi consumers

Online retailers operating in the Kingdom currently offer their customers payment through a variety of methods that include, but are not limited to, ApplePay, Pay Pal and various credit and debit card providers.^d There are also 'buy now pay later' options by payment gateways service providers such as Tamara and Tabby which, according to the Ministry of Commerce, are becoming increasingly popular in the Kingdom. Cash on Delivery (COD) is also still offered by many retailers in the Kingdom. Officially, the government of Saudi Arabia supports the

following e-payment portals that offer payment gateway services to eCommerce businesses: Moyasar, Payfort, Paytabs and Hyperpay¹³³.

The Financial Sector Development Program is targeting a 70% increase in digital payments by 2030¹³⁴. The Kingdom is undertaking steps to modernize payments to reach this target. Part of the increase in digital payments is linked to the rise of the domestic debit card, Mada, that was launched by SAMA and saw a 71% increase in use in late 2022¹³⁵. Spurred

on by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020¹³⁶, Saudi Arabia has seen a marked decline in COD sales. As a result, electronic payments^e increased from 37% of total sales in 2020 to 59% in 2022¹³⁷. However, local established retailers do not see COD disappearing anytime soon from the GCC. They cite COD as a payment method as essential for any new eCommerce site operating in the region¹³⁸.

Saudi consumers have several parcel delivery choices, including home delivery^f. Many retailers offer the service to buy online

^e These laws define the procedures and conditions under which eCommerce can be conducted, including data protection and electronic transactions. There is also a law defining the rights of consumers, as well as the duties and responsibilities of sellers and stakeholders who interact with consumers.

^d Mada, Visa, Mastercard, Maestro and American Express.

^e Electronic payments include credit cards, e-wallets, digital/mobile wallets, prepaid cards, and debit cards.

^f Such as Aramex, DHL, Barq Express, Saudi Post, UPS, Fetchr, SMSA Express, Careem and Naqel Express, FedEx and Zajil

and pick up in store (BOPIS), while in contrast, lockers offer a convenient alternative by providing a secure and centralized location for parcels to be delivered to or picked up from. When making a purchase, customers have the option of selecting a convenient locker near them where they can pick up their delivery or place an item that they would like to return. In

some instances, online retailers are incentivizing the use of this system over home delivery. They accomplish this through free delivery to a locker. This is the case for popular online retailer, Namshi, who have 'Noon Lockers' available in Riyadh, Jeddah and Medinah. Most internet users in Saudi Arabia in 2022 (56%) reported that free delivery was a significant factor in driving

their online purchases¹³⁹. Free delivery was also the top criterion when users were selecting which eCommerce platform to choose from¹⁴⁰. It is understandable therefore that retailers operating in the eCommerce space will be carefully considering delivery options on their platforms, sensitively balancing customer's preferences with feasible business models.

Building success through logistics and delivery collaborations

Retailers in the Kingdom are partnering with logistics and delivery providers as they strive to decrease delivery time and streamline the delivery and returns process.

As an example, Saeer, a Jeddah-based delivery service provider and logistics company launched in 2016, offers daily pick-ups from client warehouses, and same-day delivery in Jeddah, or three days to other cities in The Kingdom. The company operates a different business model to other logistics companies in the region, in that it pays clients before delivery. This reduces the typical cash

cycle of 20 days for eCommerce platforms¹⁴¹. In addition, the company operates using a freelance delivery fleet, meaning they can quickly adjust to fluctuations in demand¹⁴². Saudi firms like Saeer are keenly aware of the challenges felt by local eCommerce firms and are seeking creative ways to meet their logistics and broader business model needs in the Kingdom.

Exploring the symbiosis of fashion brands and online marketplaces

For emerging brands and other SMEs, launching an eCommerce platform may seem daunting.

Saudi companies are aware of this challenge and are making it easier for new and established businesses to create their own eCommerce platforms. Platform service providers such as Makane and Salla empower businesses to establish, operate and manage their online stores easily and without prior web development experience. These platform

service providers also offer users shipping and delivery support, as well as access to financial, marketing and data analytics tools. For smaller businesses with limited capacity to develop their own eCommerce platform, opportunities exist to collaborate with existing service providers to develop their own online presence efficiently.

Click, shop, delight: strategies for elevating consumer experiences in online shopping



Ensuring consumers have an excellent user experience when shopping online is essential to developing customer loyalty and attracting new customers. A key measure of this success is improving conversion rates, which is the ability to take a customer through the full suite of an eCommerce experience: from visiting the site, finding and selecting a product, to finally purchasing it. Below are the top five ways to improve online shopping experiences for consumers:

1. One of the most important ways of improving customer experience and conversion rates is to create an **easy check-out process**. This is especially important for Millennial and Gen Z shoppers¹⁴³. Key elements to realize this include having a website enabled with a virtual basket for shoppers to add items to, limiting distractions at the end of sale, and having a wide range of payment options available to the customer.
2. **Optimizing online platforms for mCommerce** will be critical moving forward as smartphones increasingly become the technology of choice for shoppers. Ensuring that mobile applications have a responsive design and fast load times is key to ensuring customers visit and utilize platforms – and as importantly, recommend the experience to others.
3. **Free delivery** is important to most consumers, with 56% percent of internet users in Saudi Arabia in 2022 reporting that free delivery was a significant factor that drove their online purchases¹⁴⁴. Free delivery was also the top criteria when users were selecting which eCommerce platform to choose from¹⁴⁵. This is therefore a key value feature for any eCommerce service provider looking to establish themselves in the Saudi market.
4. Having **detailed product information** along with **high quality images** has been identified as key to improving the experiences of customers. Some retailers are taking this a step further by integrating virtual try-on tools. This is already being used by certain online eyewear retailers in the Kingdom such as 'Eyewa' (www.eyewa.com). These entities use virtual try-on tools to allow customers to try on frames using their own camera and augmented reality before committing to the purchase. These two aspects drive customer satisfaction and help consumers make informed decisions, which in turn lower return rates.
5. An **easy and transparent returns policy** is a further critical component. Many customers read return policies before making their purchases. It is therefore important to make the returns process as uncomplicated for customers as possible. This does not mean that returns need to be free, but rather transparent. Successful online retailers offer a range of return options based on numerous factors. Some online retailers offer free returns, others offer returns at a set cost for all customers, while others offer return discounts for loyal customers who rarely return goods or alternatively increase the return costs rate for those customers who frequently return items.

Top four lessons from international fashion eCommerce markets

1. Delivering a seamless omnichannel experience.

Studies show the importance of having both an online and an in-store market presence. Globally, the majority of shoppers (73%) use multiple channels (online and offline) during their customer journey¹⁴⁶. Importantly, these shoppers tend to spend more than consumers who use only a single channel¹⁴⁷. Ensuring that customers have a seamless experience both in-store and online is important to maximizing customer satisfaction levels and to driving online conversion rates. An example of a seamless experience is when a customer can begin a transaction on one channel, such as browsing online, and easily end it on another, such as purchasing the item in-store. There are many ways to create a seamless omnichannel experience. One is through improved inventory management where customers browsing online can see in real time the availability of certain products helping them to plan in-store visits. This helps to prevent customer dissatisfaction and lost sales.

2. Personalizing marketing and recommendation strategies

Many large online and omni-channel retailers tailor their advertisements and make product recommendations based on their customers' previous purchases or recent searches. This is done by leveraging AI tools that collect data on product searches and purchase histories, based on a customer's visits to the store's online platform. Global giants like Net-A-Porter share new product releases with the personal shoppers of their top clients based on their individual tastes. Ounass has integrated personalized recommendations into their advertising and realized significant growth since the covid pandemic¹⁴⁸.

3. Using data analytics and customer insights

Data analytics¹⁴⁹ helps business make informed decisions based on various data collected across key categories, such as the company's products and customer purchasing habits. This can include product and inventory data to help inform product availability and re-stocking needs (see point one above) or past customer purchases and recent searches to develop personalized adverts and product recommendations (see point two above). On a broader level, data analytics can help inform business strategies by identifying key consumers, product trends, delivery method preferences, and logistics optimization opportunities.

4. Reducing return rates

Globally, online retailers aim to reduce return rates. Product returns and reverse logistics cost eCommerce businesses, as the returns process sets off a chain of events that involves transportation, warehousing, and logistics costs. Up to 25% of returned products end up in landfill as they are unfit for re-sale. This translates into over 2.2 billion kilograms of goods being moved to landfill annually¹⁵⁰. There is therefore a dire global need to drive down preventable returns and a direct cost benefit for retailers that can do so.

Businesses are turning to one AI tool to assist: virtual fitting technologies. Virtual fitting technologies allow customers to evaluate a product's look before purchasing it. This is done by using a customer's mobile phone camera to simulate the process of looking into a mirror. Although this technology does not allow a customer to assess the feel of the product, it reduces buyer uncertainty relating to its attractiveness. Globally, Farfetch has been rolling out the integration of virtual fitting technology into its app in certain countries. Where the technology has been implemented, Farfetch has recorded an improvement of 13% on shoe returns and 14% on bag returns, compared to when virtual fitting technology was not in use¹⁵¹.

Conclusion

Fashion eCommerce is likely to develop in unanticipated ways over the next few years.

Ongoing experimentation driven by rapidly evolving customer requirements and intensifying competition in the online and in-store space will see the emergence of new developments that improve customer digital interfaces with eCommerce platforms, create new in-store experiences, and ensure products and services are delivered to customers more accurately and within ever shorter lead times. The rapid growth and changing profile of the Saudi fashion market and its associated local ecosystem suggest that Saudi Arabia will be positioned at the heart of these online and in-store changes.

Enhancing online shopping experiences for consumers is crucial for building customer loyalty. By prioritizing an easy check-out process, optimizing platforms for mobile commerce, offering free delivery, providing detailed product information, and implementing transparent returns policies, brands can create an environment that resonates with the preferences of modern consumers, especially in markets like Saudi Arabia.

Drawing insights from international fashion eCommerce markets further underscores the importance of seamless omnichannel experiences, personalized marketing, and recommendation strategies.

These lessons highlight the need for businesses to adapt to changing consumer behaviors and preferences. Seamlessly integrating online and in-store experiences, leveraging AI for personalized marketing, harnessing the power of data analytics for informed decision-making, and employing innovative technologies like virtual try-on tools contribute significantly to driving customer satisfaction and reducing return rates.

As the global landscape evolves, businesses must remain agile

and responsive to emerging trends. This white paper's review of global eCommerce trends and quantifying the Saudi Arabian opportunity highlights that eCommerce can no longer be seen as peripheral to physical store shopping in Saudi Arabia. For brands looking to expand or deepen their market presence, it will be necessary to deploy bold eCommerce strategies and upskill through the various Saudi initiatives noted in this report to unlock this US\$4.08 billion opportunity by 2027¹⁵².



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