GROWTH CROSSROADS

2026 POST-EVENT REPORT

SAVE THE DATE

February 1-2, 2027

2027 ANNUAL MEETING
RLC GLOBAL FORUM

Choosing direction

The 2026 RLC Global Forum convened in Riyadh at a moment of profound transition for global commerce and the consumer economy.

Growth remains the ambition of every organization, yet the forces shaping that growth, from geopolitics and capital flows to technological transformation and evolving consumer expectations, are shifting rapidly and redefining traditional models of expansion.

Recent developments across the Middle East have reminded us how closely business, society, and regional stability are interconnected. Our thoughts are with those affected across the region. We remain in close dialogue with our partners and community throughout the Middle East and internationally, reflecting the long-standing relationships and commitments that continue to shape this platform. It is precisely in moments of volatility that the RLC platform must serve its highest purpose, acting as a trusted space for the high-level cooperation and clarity required to navigate a world in flux.

The theme of this year's Forum, Growth Crossroads, was chosen because the global retail and consumer-facing ecosystems are confronting a structural reckoning. We moved past the surface narratives of the industry to focus on the mechanics of power: the selective nature of capital, the shifting geography of influence from the West to the East, and the innovation frontiers opened by AI.

What I saw in Riyadh was a community of C-suite leaders and policymakers who have moved past the era of "growth at all costs." The discussions captured in this report reflect a new era of leadership, one that is unsentimental about the challenges, yet relentless in its pursuit of distinction.

The direction we choose today will shape the institutional intelligence of our organizations for the decade ahead.

Thank you to our partners and to our government and ministry counterparts for their support and engagement in ensuring that RLC continues to serve as a trusted platform for market-shaping dialogue.

Panos Linardos

Chairman, RLC Global Forum

Retail and Saudi Arabia's next economic chapter

At the 2026 RLC Global Forum in Riyadh, **H.E. Ammar Nagadi, Vice Minister of Economy and Planning**, delivered the opening address by underscoring retail's expanding role in shaping the Kingdom's economic future.

"Retail today", he noted, "is about shaping cities and economies. Retail creates jobs, it anchors SMEs, it connects tourism, culture, logistics, manufacturing and digital services into a single ecosystem."

As the sector evolves, experience now rivals efficiency in importance. Supply chains, inventory, and last-mile delivery have become core elements of brand trust, while data, automation, and AI are transforming forecasting, pricing, and customer engagement. Success in this new landscape will favor those who balance global reach with local relevance and ambition with resilience.

His Excellency positioned Saudi Arabia as one of retail's most dynamic growth frontiers. "Transformation under Vision 2030 has been deliberate and structural. Today, the economy looks very different from a decade ago. It is more diversified; it is more private sector-led and it is more integrated than ever with the global economy. With over half of our GDP stemming from non-oil activity, the Kingdom continues to attract capital, companies and people at scale. In 2025, visitor numbers surpassed 120 million and more than 700 global companies are now operating on the ground," he explained.

This growth, he emphasized, has been achieved alongside macroeconomic stability, with inflation near 2% and unemployment at record low. Retail, in this context, is where economic reform becomes tangible, translating national strategy into everyday experiences that elevate the quality of life.

Looking ahead, the government will continue to shape policies and invest in the necessary infrastructure to drive long-term value creation. This means economic policies and reforms that strengthen the business environment and reduce friction.

The opportunity now, His Excellency concluded, lies in connecting demand, capital, and creativity into cohesive strategies that define the next phase of growth.

"Over the next two days, we will step back, we will learn from peers across markets, and we will challenge our own assumptions on growth. Because growth today is not constrained by demand, capital or creativity. It is constrained by how effectively we connect these elements together into the strategies for the future."

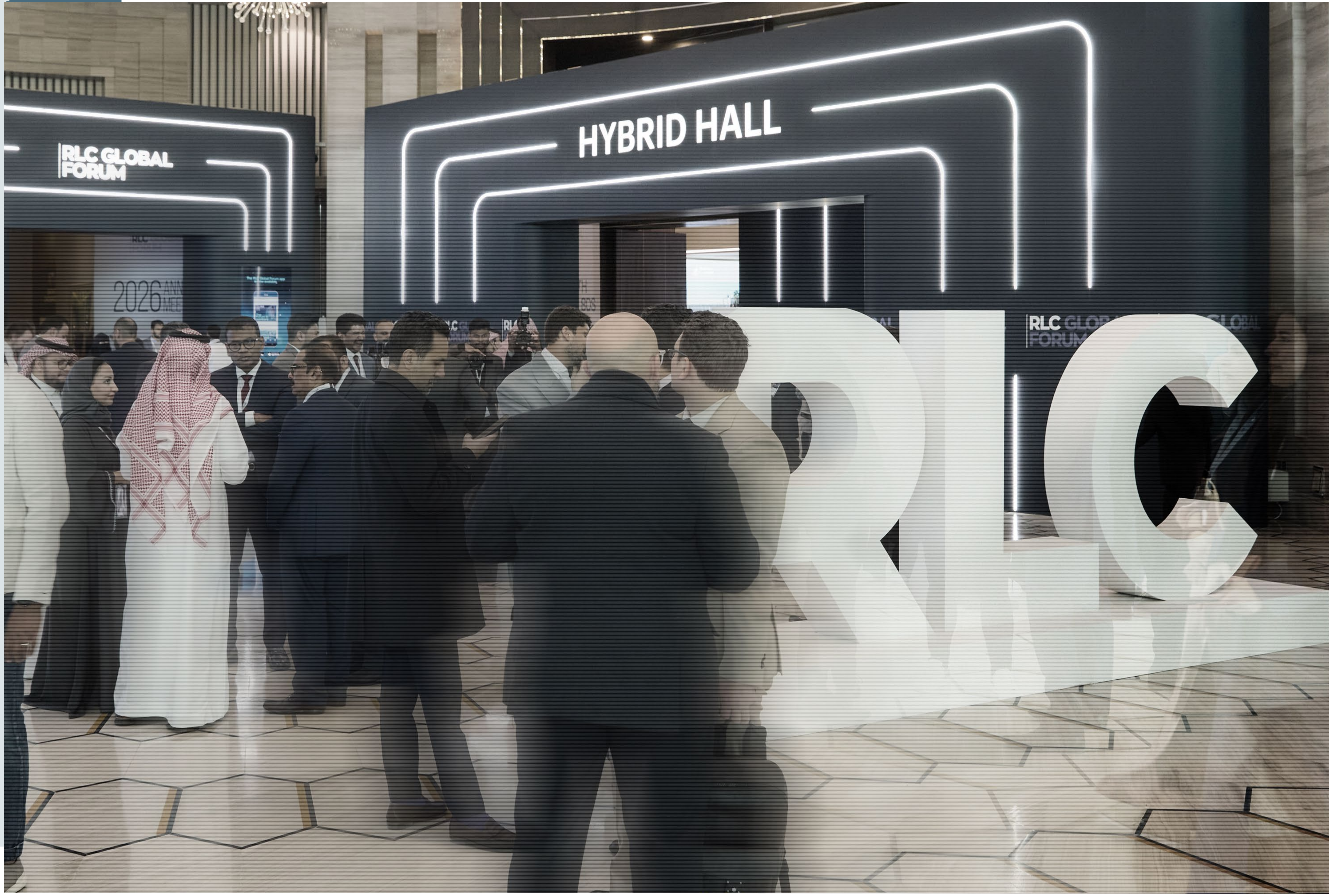
Growth at all costs?

Global commerce is resetting. Growth remains the industry's north star, but the journey there has become more complex and decidedly more competitive. Markets are expanding unevenly, capital is more selective and consumer behavior is evolving faster than traditional playbooks can keep pace with.

We are entering an era where growth can no longer rely on scale alone. Profitability, precision, and resilience are now equally non-negotiable. Meanwhile, consumers are reassessing value, loyalty, and expectations, forcing brands and retailers to rethink how demand is created and sustained.

Against this backdrop, the 2026 RLC Global Forum in Riyadh framed growth as a strategic choice. Where will the next wave of expansion come from? Which markets offer depth, opportunity and not just momentum? How should capital be deployed in an environment defined by volatility? And how can organizations engineer growth that is disciplined and durable?

"Growth Crossroads" captures this inflection point. It signals a shift from expansion at any cost to growth by design. Growth grounded in sharper economics, stronger ecosystems, and a clearer understanding of the greater forces reshaping the architecture of markets.



Neeraj Tehkchandani

Neeraj Tehkchandani, CEO of Apparel Group, discussed scaling brands across vastly different segments, maintaining global standards in emerging markets, and positioning Saudi Arabia and India at the center of the Group's next expansion chapter.

On redefining the value equation...

Price is one of the elements of the value proposition, but more important are all the other things that come together as an ecosystem: the convenience for the customer, the store ambience, the experience at the store, and the various channels of delivery. Today, we have digital commerce, we have quick commerce, we have social commerce. When you combine all of those together, that's the value equation

On balancing growth, quality and accessibility across segments...

The critical thing is our delivery promise. The critical thing is the commitment we make to the customer—and that we stand by it. Whether it's our own brand, R&B, or Tommy Hilfiger, one thing you will find at all of our stores is that we deliver the same value proposition you will find with Tommy Hilfiger in London, Paris, Milan, New York, or any other market.

On scaling across the Global South...

For us, the critical growth markets now are definitely Saudi Arabia. The region is seeing almost 30 new malls coming between now and 2030, including major developments such as Avenues Riyadh, Westfield Riyadh, and Westfield Jeddah.
But India is also a big opportunity.

On this year's growth priorities...

We have taken on 28 new brands, and now we have to scale them. This year is about scaling all the new brands that we have signed.


RLC
Soirée
RLC GLOBAL FORUM
KERING

The evening before the 2026 RLC Annual Meeting, an intimate circle of international retail and luxury executives, policymakers and academics gathered at the Residence of the French Ambassador in Riyadh at the invitation of Kering and RLC Global Forum. The exclusive pre-event reception set a deliberate tone for the days ahead.

Conversations centered on long-term value, creativity, leadership and responsibility, while reinforcing ties with the Kingdom's rapidly evolving retail landscape.

Welcoming guests, Panos Linardos, Chairman of RLC Global Forum, remarked: "This evening is meant to be informal, but purposeful; a moment to connect ahead of the conversations that begin tomorrow. Conversations about how fashion, lifestyle and retail are evolving in a world that demands both creativity and responsibility."

Speakers: Stefania Lazzaroni, CEO, Altagamma / **Miral Youssef**, President, Kering Middle East & Africa
Moderator: Hala Zgeib, Luxury Retail & Tech Executive

Women Leaders and their Journey in Retail and Luxury

Two women. Two leaders. Two distinct journeys. Two different expressions of authority. Together, their stories reveal what it truly takes to build influence at the highest levels of retail and luxury.

MIRAL YOUSSEF

The power of micro-moments

Miral Youssef's professional story is one of precision timing and trust. Now President of Kering Middle East and Africa, Youssef describes her path not as a series of grand turning points, but as *"a sequence of micro-moments."* The brands she worked with—Ralph Lauren at its cultural peak, Vivienne Westwood during the designer's lifetime, Chalhoub Group at the inception of its own concepts—placed her at inflection points of growth and creativity.

At Kering, she joined to build Balenciaga in the region, laying foundations during a period of triple-digit expansion. Eight years later, her current role was created to bridge global headquarters and regional dynamics.

"It was those pivotal moments where a lot of the roles that I took on were not roles that I actually decided to go for. It was my leadership that had that trust in me and that's where I ventured into."

Notably, many of her roles were not self-nominated. They were entrusted to her by leaders who saw potential she had not yet claimed herself. That trust became central to her leadership philosophy: create space for others to step forward before they fully believe they are ready.

In uncertainty—whether geopolitical shifts, leadership changes or market volatility—Youssef rejects the myth of the all-knowing leader. Steady leadership, she argues, is not about having answers. It is about building environments where others feel safe to find them.

"It's not about having the clarity. It's more about trusting the process, creating a safe space that they don't fear making mistakes, that they can innovate. Really, we can see creativity being fostered from that."

She is fluent in paradox: invest boldly while cutting costs; be firm yet empathetic; manage global headwinds in a region experiencing growth. Her approach centers on trust, coalition-building and timing.

In senior rooms, preparation is her confidence multiplier. As someone who is dyslexic, she over-prepares deliberately. She builds informal alliances before formal meetings. She adapts tone and language depending on whether she is speaking to creatives or landlords. Influence, she demonstrates, is engineered long before the meeting begins.

And being right? It is insufficient. Context, timing, and alignment matter more than correctness alone.

STEFANIA LAZZARONI

From Corporate to Cultural Power

Stefania Lazzaroni's career reads like a masterclass in reinvention. Consulting. Global corporates such as Coca-Cola and Discovery Networks. Entrepreneurship. And now, CEO of Altagamma, the foundation representing 122 of Italy's most iconic luxury brands. Her trajectory was anything but linear. And that, she argues, is precisely the point.

"Don't be afraid to just change your route, because every single adventure gives you more energy and more knowledge to then face new challenges."

In Italy, where long tenures once defined professional credibility, moving across sectors required courage. Lazzaroni moved from structured corporate environments into entrepreneurship, where there were no safety nets. Later, she transitioned again, this time into an institutional, non-profit role that requires political fluency as much as business acumen.

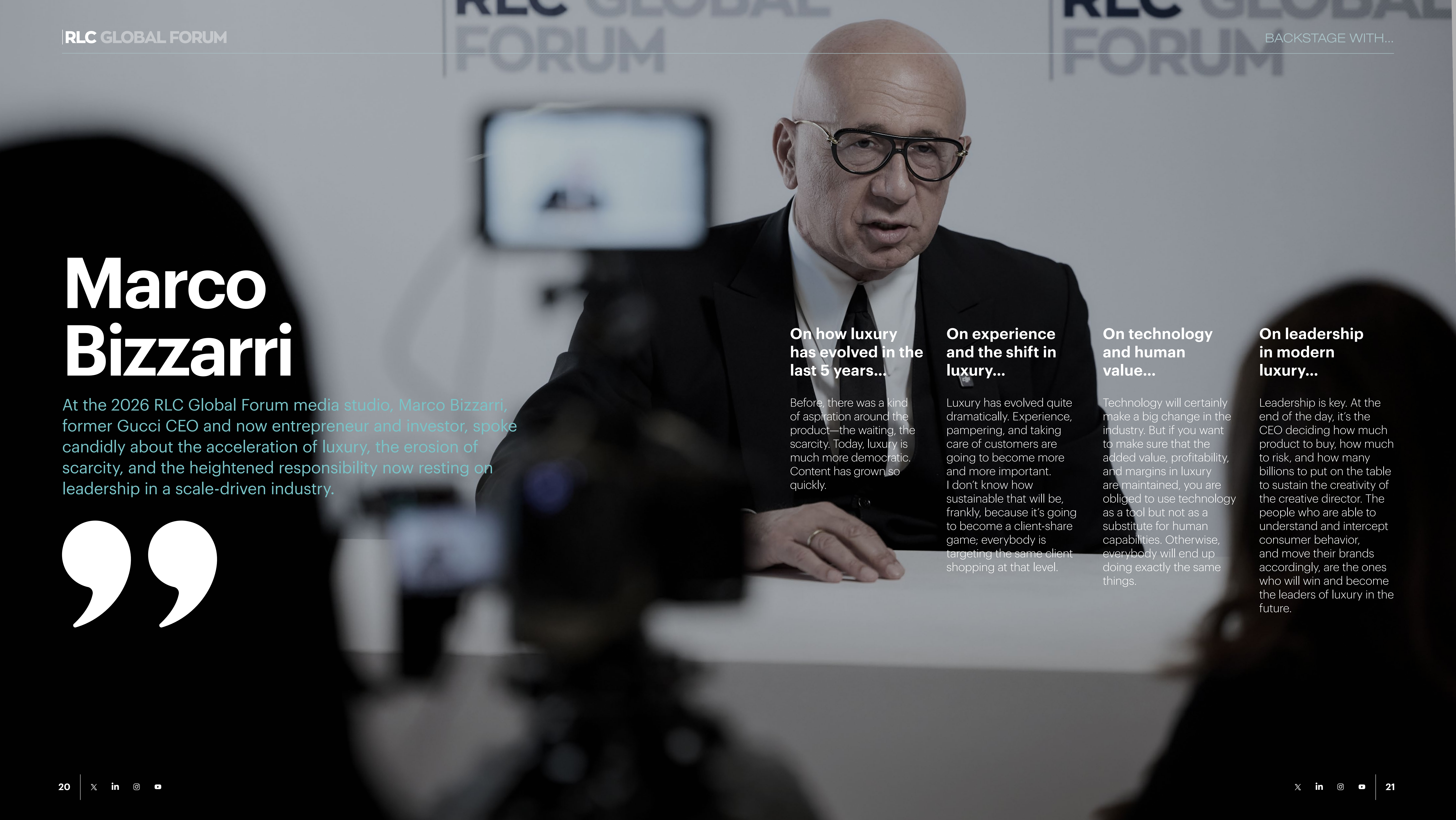
At Altagamma, cultural stewardship is key. She speaks less about revenue and more about values: craftsmanship, heritage, creativity, and the intangible power of brands as national assets.

Luxury, she insists, is misunderstood. Too often dismissed as frivolous or status-driven, it remains under-recognized as a strategic industry and a vehicle of Italian soft power. Convincing policymakers that craftsmanship and cultural capital deserve the same institutional backing as "hard" industries has become part of her mandate.

"My challenge is to really make our politicians see that luxury brands are the soft power of Italy."

Her advocacy extends to education. As global luxury demand grows, so does the need for artisans. Yet families often steer young talent away from technical craftsmanship. Through initiatives like "Adopt a School," Altagamma's brands are repositioning these careers as prestigious and financially viable.

Lazzaroni's leadership journey has evolved from fitting into male-dominated rooms decades ago—where adopting a tougher tone felt necessary—to embracing empathy, inclusivity and network-building as strategic strengths. Authenticity, she believes, is leverage.



Marco Bizzarri

At the 2026 RLC Global Forum media studio, Marco Bizzarri, former Gucci CEO and now entrepreneur and investor, spoke candidly about the acceleration of luxury, the erosion of scarcity, and the heightened responsibility now resting on leadership in a scale-driven industry.

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On how luxury has evolved in the last 5 years...

Before, there was a kind of aspiration around the product—the waiting, the scarcity. Today, luxury is much more democratic. Content has grown so quickly.

On experience and the shift in luxury...

Luxury has evolved quite dramatically. Experience, pampering, and taking care of customers are going to become more and more important. I don't know how sustainable that will be, frankly, because it's going to become a client-share game; everybody is targeting the same client shopping at that level.

On technology and human value...

Technology will certainly make a big change in the industry. But if you want to make sure that the added value, profitability, and margins in luxury are maintained, you are obliged to use technology as a tool but not as a substitute for human capabilities. Otherwise, everybody will end up doing exactly the same things.

On leadership in modern luxury...

Leadership is key. At the end of the day, it's the CEO deciding how much product to buy, how much to risk, and how many billions to put on the table to sustain the creativity of the creative director. The people who are able to understand and intercept consumer behavior, and move their brands accordingly, are the ones who will win and become the leaders of luxury in the future.

GROWTH IN A CHANGED WORLD

Growth is now shaped by volatility, higher costs, and shifting consumer flows. As geoeconomics, regulation, and investor expectations reset the rules, leaders are being forced to rethink how growth is built in a more pressured, less predictable cycle.

Across the GCC and globally, understanding where demand is moving and how capital should follow it, has become a strategic priority. Retailers, brands, and investors are navigating a landscape where expansion requires greater discipline, sharper ownership models, and stronger financial oversight.

From the flow of consumer spend to the evolving role of CFOs and investors, growth today is defined by resilience, adaptability, and long-term value creation.

Speaker: **Khatija Haque**, Chief Economist EEMEA, Mastercard Economics Institute

The Flow of Spend and the GCC Consumer Economy

What will drive the GCC consumer in 2026? Khatija Haque of the Mastercard Economics Institute, drew on proprietary data to examine how structural economic shifts, demographic expansion, and digital acceleration are changing spending patterns.

A RESILIENT MACRO BACKDROP SUPPORTING CONSUMER CONFIDENCE

The outlook for the GCC consumer in 2026 is underpinned by a supportive macroeconomic environment. Despite global policy shocks and geopolitical uncertainty, the non-oil sector grew by over 4% last year and is expected to accelerate to around 4.5% in 2026, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE approaching 5%. Sustained investment, particularly in Saudi Arabia, and resilient consumer demand remain the primary growth drivers. Low inflation, averaging around 2%, has strengthened household purchasing power.

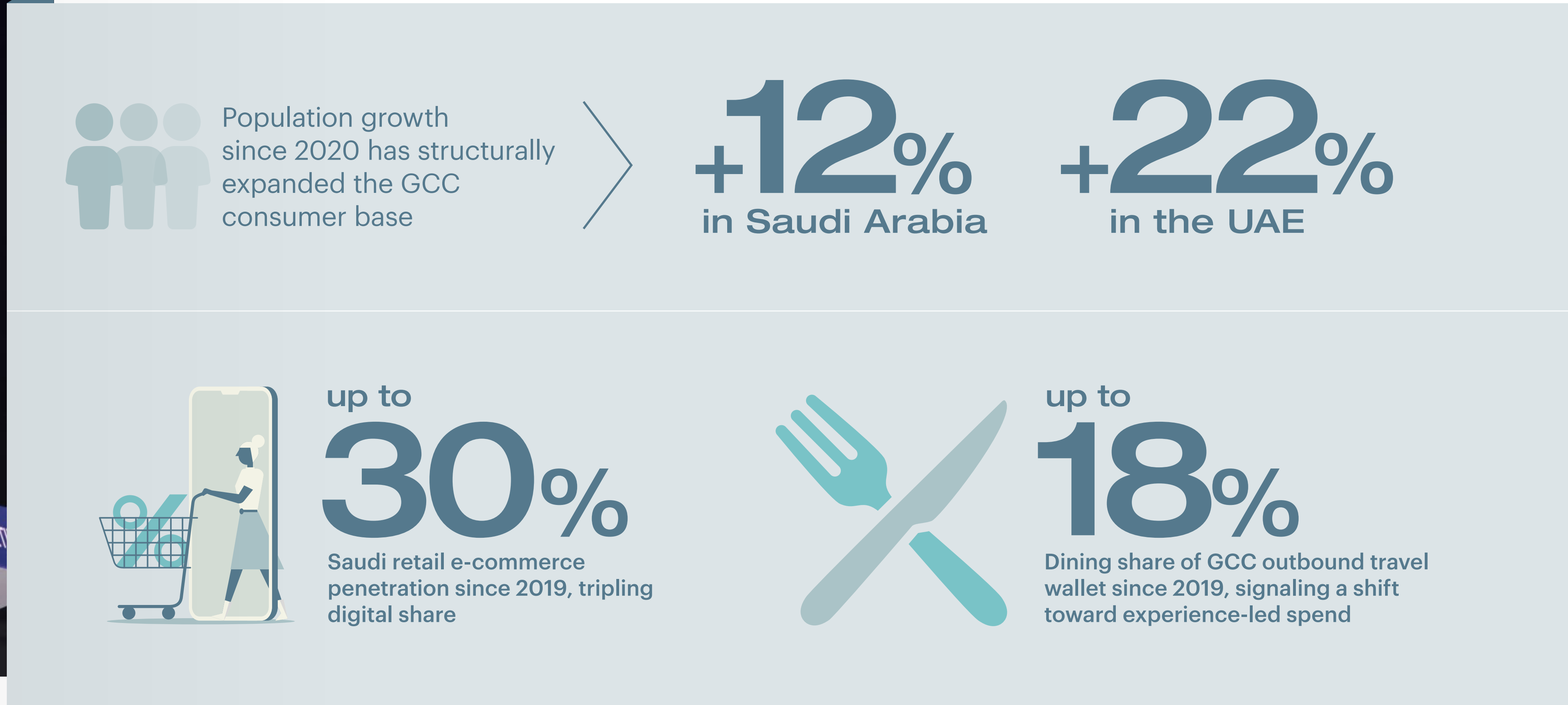
Haque structured the outlook around three core drivers: demographics, employment and income, and the cost of living. Housing has been the main contributor to inflation in cities such as Riyadh and Dubai, but rental and price increases are moderating, easing pressure on households. Falling interest rates are reducing borrowing costs, while the redirection of Chinese exports toward the GCC is increasing the availability of competitively priced goods, reinforcing a low-inflation environment for both consumers and businesses.

DEMOGRAPHIC EXPANSION AND THE RISE OF NEW HOUSEHOLDS

Population growth since 2020 has fundamentally reset the baseline for consumer spending across the GCC. Saudi Arabia's population expanded by approximately 12% over four years, while the UAE recorded growth of 22% and Oman close to 18%. This rapid expansion has translated directly into new household formation, raising aggregate demand across essential and discretionary categories. Increased female participation in the workforce, particularly in Saudi Arabia, has expanded the number of dual-income households, enabling greater allocation toward discretionary categories.

FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT AND THE QUALITY OF CONSUMER

Five years of greenfield foreign direct investment reveal a decisive shift toward new-economy sectors across the GCC, including renewables, ICT, automotive manufacturing, and financial services. These sectors are attracting higher-skilled, higher-income talent, strengthening employment and income growth across the region. This has raised both income levels and expectations among consumers.



HOW SPENDING IS BEING REALLOCATED ACROSS CATEGORIES

Consumers are increasing wallet share toward discretionary categories such as dining, electronics, and travel, while continuing to spend on essentials. Similar patterns are evident across the region. When traveling to Europe in particular, clothing and apparel account for the largest share of spending by GCC consumers. Within travel overall, dining's share of spend has risen from approximately 12% pre-pandemic to around 18%, while accommodation accounts for a smaller share of overall travel expenditure.

DIGITAL COMMERCE, AI ADOPTION, AND SUBSCRIPTION MODELS

E-commerce's share of retail transactions in Saudi Arabia rose from under 10% in 2019 to nearly 30% last year, with domestic e-commerce driving most of the acceleration and reshaping the local retail market. Businesses and consumers are increasingly adopting AI-enabled tools, with SMEs leveraging them to compete more effectively, as the next phase shifts toward agentic commerce. Subscription models are expanding, particularly in the UAE: the share of cards with a single recurring subscription has declined, while approximately 15% of cards now carry four or more recurring payments — reflecting consumer preference for spreading costs and reducing friction across categories including fitness, food delivery, supermarkets, and travel.

LUXURY, TRAVEL, AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF SPEND

The GCC continues to favor high-end luxury goods, particularly through in-store purchases. Unlike global markets where experiences often outpace products, consumers in Saudi Arabia and the UAE prioritize ultra-premium goods, with luxury outperforming high street in the post-pandemic recovery. Travel spending is shifting toward dining and value-driven destinations in Asia and Eastern Europe, supported by currency advantages. While Western markets remain dominant in volume, the fastest inbound growth comes from Asia and emerging EMEA markets, with developed visitors favoring experiences and emerging-market visitors favoring goods.

THE CEO VIEW: CAPTURING THE NEXT PHASE OF DEMAND

The GCC consumer enters 2026 from a position of structural strength, supported by income growth, demographic expansion, digital acceleration, and contained inflation. Growth is driven by fundamentals, not stimulus. For CEOs, the imperative is clear: align with a more affluent, more digital, and increasingly value-conscious consumer.

Speakers: **Dr. Bander Hamooh**, CEO, Panda Retail Company / **John Hadden**, CEO, Alshaya Group

Moderator: **Paul Martin**, Global Retail Growth Leader - Partner & Managing Director, AlixPartners

Engineering Growth in a Pressured Market

In a climate defined by volatility, selective consumer spending, and intensifying competition, growth can no longer rely on expansion alone. This session examined how retail leaders are engineering resilient, capital-efficient growth models, balancing fundamentals, differentiation and strategic investment, while navigating pressure across markets.

VALUE ASCENDANT, CONSUMERS CAUTIOUS

Paul Martin of AlixPartners set the context with global and Saudi market data. In food retail, the value channel is the fastest-growing format worldwide, a pattern increasingly visible in Saudi Arabia, where discount formats—though still small—are projected to expand at the quickest pace.

In non-food, categories such as apparel, footwear, and health and beauty continue to grow, albeit at a slower rate than food. In Saudi Arabia, health and beauty stands out as the fastest-growing non-food segment.

Consumer sentiment globally remains conservative, with households saving more and spending more selectively. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are comparatively more optimistic, yet even here consumers are diversifying spend and demonstrating heightened price sensitivity.

Against this backdrop, Martin emphasized like-for-like (LFL) volume growth as a central CEO priority. In slower markets, performance depends less on expansion and more on share gains and operational precision.

LIKE-FOR-LIKE AS A STRATEGIC COMPASS

Dr. Bander Hamooh, CEO of Panda Retail Company, described LFL as a direct indicator of business health. Decline points to structural weakness; sustained growth reflects operational strength. After a major reset several years ago, Panda has delivered five consecutive years of positive LFL growth in a challenging grocery market. He noted a broader shift in the Kingdom toward quality of earnings, cash generation, and sustainable profitability over aggressive top-line expansion.

John Hadden, CEO of Alshaya Group, linked LFL to strategic clarity. Over the past five to six years, Alshaya has navigated Covid, hyperinflation, geopolitical tensions, and currency volatility through geographic and category diversification. Strong LFL growth in Turkey and the UAE has offset softer conditions in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, while food and beauty have outperformed apparel and home. He also highlighted sustained pressure on mall footfall beyond the top-tier destinations, making conversion and basket optimization increasingly critical.

BACK TO RETAIL BASICS

Both CEOs stressed that fundamentals still decide outcomes. For Panda, that means sharper category roles, assortments aligned to post-Covid behavior, and pricing decisions informed by SKU- and store-level elasticity. Competitive pricing on essential food and cleaning items remains non-negotiable, backed by supply-chain discipline, shelf availability, and a multi-tier private label strategy.

The rise of value-led formats in Saudi Arabia signals higher price sensitivity, demanding structural responses.

Hadden framed execution around the "four Ps" plus people, with price now the primary driver of competitiveness. Traditional franchise pricing assumptions are under pressure, and entry price architecture must reflect local realities, an approach embedded in the Primark launch. Inventory is another lever: Alshaya cut stock by 50% last year to release working capital and support fuller-price selling, supported by stronger in-house data capabilities.

DIFFERENTIATION THROUGH FRESH, DATA, AND LOYALTY

Differentiation is increasingly data-led. For Panda, people remain a primary advantage. Its 20,000 employees and service culture are treated as strategic assets, while clearer segmentation—value seekers, young professionals, planned shoppers—enables tighter assortment and promotional focus.

Fresh is another differentiator. Managing fruits, vegetables, and proteins at scale demands sourcing expertise and operational discipline, reinforcing Panda's strength in daily essentials. Its cashback loyalty model extends to partners across travel, fuel, F&B, and entertainment, widening customer engagement.

At Alshaya, the Aura program, launched three years ago, now includes nearly 11 million members across five GCC markets. More than 70 percent of transactions are linked to the platform, providing data that supports personalization and cross-brand engagement.

SELECTIVE BIG BETS

Strategic growth also requires disciplined capital deployment. Alshaya is advancing major mixed-use investments in Saudi Arabia, including Avenues Riyadh and Avenues Khobar, integrating retail, hospitality, and entertainment. Geographic expansion into Croatia, Uzbekistan, and Georgia adds diversification. AI investments are focused on operational efficiency and future commerce applications.

Panda is exploring real estate partnerships around its store catchments and investing in data capabilities, leveraging more than 110 million annual transactions to unlock additional value.

THE CEO VIEW: PRECISION OVER EXPANSION

Engineering growth in a pressured market requires leaders to strengthen fundamentals, sharpen differentiation, and deploy capital with discipline. Like-for-like growth remains the clearest measure of health, sustained through pricing rigor, inventory control, and smarter use of data.

If you spend all of your time worrying about the external factors, you are unlikely going to engineer growth in this pressurized environment.

Paul Martin

Speaker: Yehuda Shmidman, Chairman, Founder & CEO, WHP Global

Interviewer: Mina Fader, Managing Director, Baker Retailing Center, The Wharton School

Brand Ownership in a Volatile Market

In conversation with Mina Fader, Yehuda Shmidman explored why enduring brand equity outperforms short-term market cycles. Drawing on WHP Global's global acquisition strategy, the discussion touched on how disciplined ownership, emotional resonance, and long-term capital deployment enable iconic brands to scale across geographies.

SCALING THROUGH BRAND ACQUISITION

The session opened with an overview of WHP Global's growth trajectory, which over seven years has expanded to a portfolio valued at more than USD 8 billion through acquisitions and joint ventures. Yehuda Shmidman highlighted the recent acquisition of a controlling stake in Land's End, a USD 1.5 billion brand with deep roots in direct-to-consumer retail. Of that business, approximately USD 900 million is generated through e-commerce, underscoring the strength of digitally native brand models built long before e-commerce became mainstream.

WHAT DEFINES A STRONG BRAND

Shmidman outlined a clear framework for evaluating brand strength through three core indicators. The first is awareness within the intended demographic. The second is affinity, or whether consumers actively like the brand. The third is purchase intent, reflecting willingness to pay. When all three indicators are present, a brand possesses enduring equity that can be scaled across markets and channels.

BRANDS VERSUS BALANCE SHEETS

A central theme was the distinction between brand failure and corporate failure. Using Toys "R" Us as a case study, Shmidman emphasized that iconic brands rarely disappear due to consumer rejection. Instead, they are often undermined by capital structure decisions. In the case of Toys "R" Us, excessive leverage following a leveraged buyout ultimately collapsed the company, while the brand itself remained intact.

Since acquiring the brand, WHP Global has expanded Toys "R" Us to approximately 1,500 stores across 35 countries, including Saudi Arabia, the wider GCC, and markets such as Morocco and Lebanon. The brand's emotional connection, built over generations, proved transferable across geographies once freed from unsustainable financial constraints.

VOLATILITY AS AN INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY

Shmidman described recent years as a near-continuous state of disruption, spanning COVID-19, supply chain instability, inflation, tariffs, and shifting consumer sentiment. While such conditions create uncertainty for operators, they also generate acquisition opportunities.

WHP's strategy has been to view volatility as temporary while treating brand equity as permanent. During periods of market stress, owners may seek to divest assets, creating entry points for long-term investors. This mindset aligns closely with the GCC's generational approach to capital allocation, where decisions are framed over decades rather than quarters.

THE GCC AS A GROWTH MARKET FOR GLOBAL BRANDS

Shmidman identified the GCC as a priority growth region, noting that while WHP generates roughly USD 8 billion in annual retail sales globally, only around 30% currently comes from international markets, with limited penetration in the Middle East. This was described as a strategic gap rather than a limitation of demand.

Beyond expansion metrics, Shmidman framed the region as structurally aligned with WHP's long-term philosophy. He pointed to Saudi Arabia's young population, rising wedding and family formation rates, and growing appetite for global brands as indicators of sustained demand. Rather than approaching the market transactionally, he emphasized partnership — working with operators on the ground who understand local culture, real estate dynamics, and consumer expectations. He noted that WHP's current footprint in the GCC represents a strategic opportunity for acceleration and even suggested that, over time, the establishment of a regional office would be a natural progression. For WHP, the Middle East is foundational to the next stage of global brand growth.

BRAND DNA AND THE DISCIPLINE OF VALUE

Successful brand ownership requires restraint as much as ambition. WHP does not seek to reinvent the brands it acquires or dilute their core identity. Leadership decisions are filtered through brand DNA, preserving consistency across markets while enabling thoughtful local execution.

That same discipline applies to valuation. Brand equity, he noted, is ultimately measured by the premium consumers are willing to pay above the intrinsic cost of a product. When that premium erodes—or turns negative—it signals a breakdown in emotional relevance. Protecting brand DNA is therefore not philosophical; it is financial.

THE CEO VIEW: OWNERSHIP AS A LONG-TERM ADVANTAGE

The future of retail belongs to brands with durable emotional resonance, disciplined ownership, and global scalability. In a volatile market, brand equity provides continuity, while volatility itself creates opportunity for those willing to invest with patience and conviction. Strong brands outlive cycles, technologies, and balance sheets. Ownership, when guided by brand DNA and long-term vision, becomes a powerful platform for growth across generations, geographies, and channels.

Speaker: Philipp Carlsson-Szlezak, Managing Director, Partner, Global Chief Economist, BCG

Geoeconomics and the New Consumer Economy at the Crossroads

Philipp Carlsson-Szlezak, Managing Director and Global Chief Economist at BCG, unpacked the forces reshaping the global and Middle Eastern consumer economy. Moving beyond recession headlines, he examined the resilience of consumption, the link between productivity and wealth creation, and the strategic choices facing economies.

BEYOND RECESSION NARRATIVE: REALITY OF CONSUMER RESILIENCE

Despite repeated recession forecasts in major economies, global growth has held at around 3.5%. Consumer confidence collapsed during COVID and has yet to fully recover, yet actual consumption has remained uninterrupted, outperforming pre-pandemic trends and, in many regions, growing faster than GDP.

This divergence offers a clear lesson: sentiment surveys often misread real behavior—wallets matter more than words. Strong consumption has stabilized the global economy and continues to drive performance across staples and discretionary sectors, where revenues, margins, and profits remain well above pre-COVID levels.

GROWTH, WEALTH, AND SHIFTING CONSUMER PRIORITIES

Middle East, regional growth of around 2.7% positions the region between advanced economies and faster-growing developing Asia. While this growth supports expanding consumer markets, it emphasized that GDP growth alone is incomplete measure of economic progress. Wealth accumulation, particularly on a per-capita basis, is more directly linked to consumption patterns and long-term demand. A divergence between GDP and wealth growth has meaningful implications for consumer-facing businesses. As wealth rises, spending patterns shift unevenly across categories. Some sectors gain share of wallet, while others lose relevance. These dynamics influence what consumers buy, how they buy, and where they spend, creating strategic inflection points for firms operating in the region.

PRODUCTIVITY: ENGINE FOR SUSTAINABLE WEALTH

Long-term wealth is anchored in productivity growth, particularly labor productivity, which closely tracks sustained increases in living standards. Technology plays a role, but only when it meaningfully reduces costs—especially labor costs. Ride-hailing platforms, for example, improved convenience but did not remove labor from the model or generate lasting price declines. True productivity gains show up in falling prices, lifting real incomes.

The impact varies by stakeholder. Consumers have benefited enormously: in advanced economies, the share of household spending on food has dropped from around 40% to 10%, reflecting decades of agricultural productivity gains and rising real incomes. Fears of mass technological unemployment have historically proven overstated, with new industries and occupations offsetting disruption.

For firms, however, technology is a double-edged sword. While adoption is unavoidable, widespread diffusion often compresses margins and intensifies competition, as seen in industries such as airlines and automotive manufacturing.

MIDDLE EAST DEVELOPMENT MODEL AND ROLE OF THE CONSUMER

In Middle East, Significant progress been made by diversifying away from oil, with the oil share of output declining steadily across price cycles. Consumer-first economies, exemplified by US, and investment-first models, exemplified by China. The difference between these models is stark, with roughly a 20%-point gap in the share of consumption in GDP, comparable levels of wealth. Consumer-first models tend to deliver more balanced, less debt-intensive growth, while investment-first models enable faster expansion but with different trade-offs. Currently, major Gulf economies sit between these two poles, with consumption shares slightly above China's but well below those of mature consumer-driven economies. Shifting toward a more consumer-centric model would have significant implications for policy, investment priorities, and corporate strategy.

GEOECONOMICS, TRADE DEPENDENCIES, AND STRATEGIC EXPOSURE

Global economy is moving away from a largely frictionless "freeport" model toward more fragmented environment characterized by selective alignment and strategic constraints which introduces new risks for economies and firms that benefited from highly concentrated trade relationships. China's share of imports has approached 40% to 50% in some cases, reflecting legacy of globalized supply chains. These relationships deliver efficiency gains but also create exposure in world of rising geopolitical tension. Import composition matters as much as aggregate volumes, with strategic goods such as technology, defense, aviation, and pharmaceuticals still predominantly sourced from Western partners.

Top 3 Strategic Signals

1 GLOBAL RESILIENCE

Global GDP growth:

3.5%

Consumer spending outperformed recession expectations.

2 REGIONAL GROWTH CONTEXT

Middle East growth:

2.7%

Faster than advanced economies. Slower than developing Asia.

3 DEVELOPMENT MODEL CROSSROADS

20 PERCENTAGE POINT GAP

in consumption share of GDP (Consumer-first vs investment-first models).

THE CEO VIEW: READING THE REAL SIGNALS

Consumer economy remains fundamentally strong, but navigating its future requires disciplined reading of data, focus on productivity-driven wealth creation, and nuanced understanding of geoeconomic risk. In Middle East, opportunity lies in shaping development model that balances growth, resilience, and consumer empowerment while adapting to more complex global economic order.

Alison Rehill-Erguven, CEO of Cenomi Centers, outlines how retail real estate is shifting from scale to significance, and how Saudi Arabia is emerging as a global benchmark for next-generation destinations.

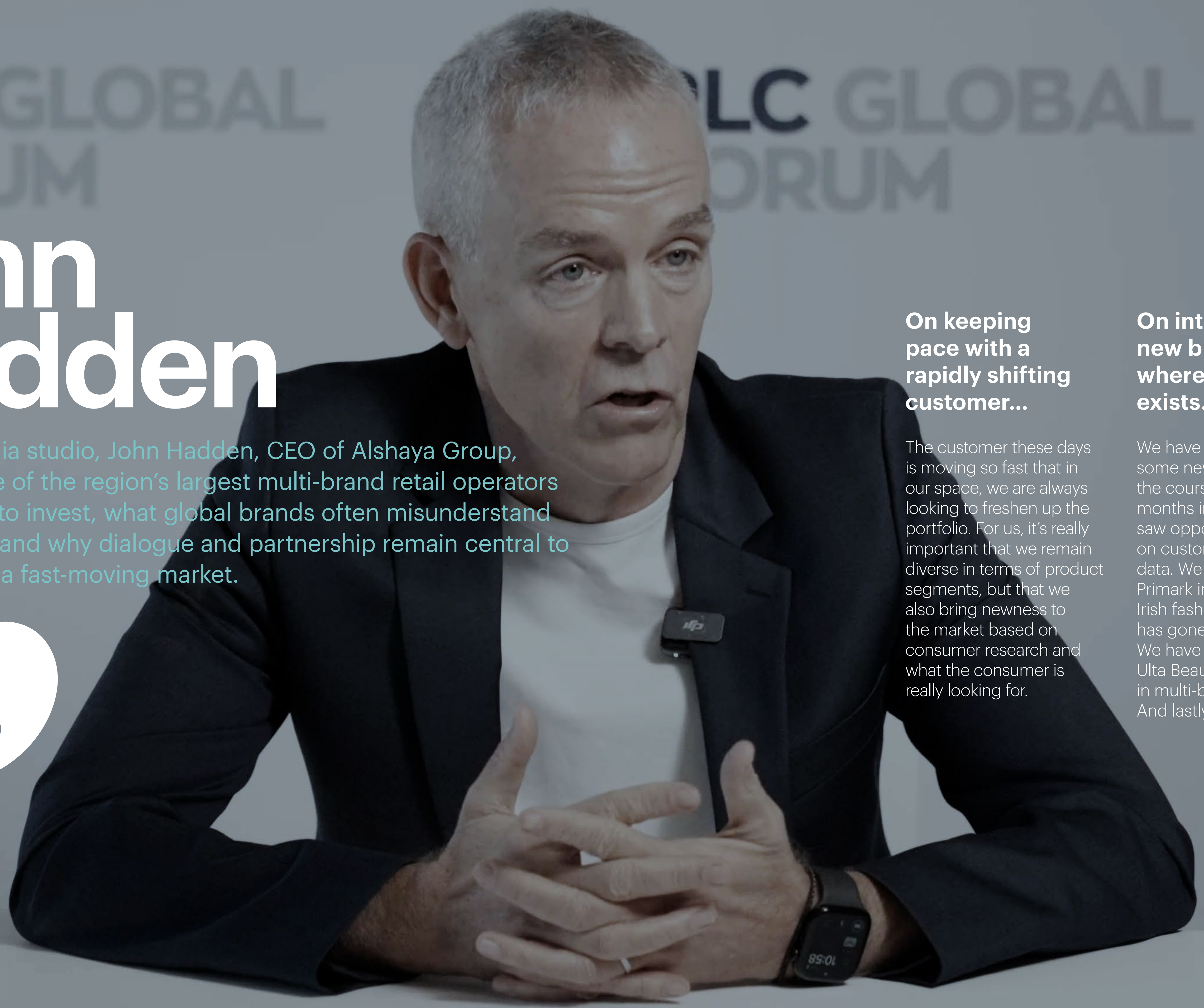
Value today is about relevance and adaptability, not just scale. It's about creating lifestyle destinations people want to spend time in, places that are multi-functional and encompass retail, entertainment and community in a meaningful way. The real advantage now is experience, engagement and long-term impact.

Retail destinations in Saudi Arabia are set to become more experiential, more integrated and more tech-enabled. They won't just be driven by shopping or the retail experience; they will be transformed into lifestyle hubs that reflect the objectives of Vision 2030, delivering premium, innovative and cohesive spaces that serve the community on a broader scale.

The RLC Global Forum is where the future of retail is shaped. It brings together the leaders and changemakers redefining the industry globally, and for Saudi Arabia, it's an opportunity to showcase our transformation while **building partnerships that drive the next phase of growth**.

The CEO view

Retail destinations will win on relevance, delivering adaptive, experience-led ecosystems that create lasting community impact.



John Hadden

At the RLC media studio, John Hadden, CEO of Alshaya Group, shared how one of the region's largest multi-brand retail operators decides where to invest, what global brands often misunderstand about the Gulf, and why dialogue and partnership remain central to retail growth in a fast-moving market.

On keeping pace with a rapidly shifting customer...

The customer these days is moving so fast that in our space, we are always looking to freshen up the portfolio. For us, it's really important that we remain diverse in terms of product segments, but that we also bring newness to the market based on consumer research and what the consumer is really looking for.

On introducing new brands where demand exists...

We have introduced some new brands over the course of the last 12 months in areas where we saw opportunity, based on customer research and data. We have launched Primark in the region, the Irish fashion retailer, and it has gone down really well. We have also launched Ulta Beauty out of the US in multi-branded beauty. And lastly, Chipotle.

On what global brands must get right in the Gulf...

A global brand entering the region now should do two things: first and foremost, find the right partner. I think that's the most critical decision you can make, as long as you also believe that your product will work and that consumers will like what you're here to sell. That's why consumer research is essential. So, make sure your customer research is done and, secondly, choose the right partner.

On the role of strategy in driving resilience...

Like-for-like is a key metric in retail from day one. It is fundamental to your business. It speaks to the health of the business. It speaks to the longevity of the business. But ultimately, it all comes back to strategy.

Speakers: **Ali Ahmed Abussaud**, Founder & CEO, Hala Capital / **Pierre Mallevays**, Founder & Managing Partner, Savigny Partners LLP

Moderator: **Hala Zgeib**, Luxury Retail & Tech Executive

What Investors Look for Now

Capital markets are recalibrating, and investor scrutiny has intensified. In this candid discussion, leading voices from venture and private equity explored how expectations have shifted away from growth narratives and toward capital discipline, brand authenticity, AI monetization, and management quality.

CAPITAL ALLOCATION IN A MORE SELECTIVE ENVIRONMENT

The discussion opened with a clear assessment of how capital allocation in the GCC has evolved. Investors are deploying capital more selectively, prioritizing markets with regulatory clarity, co-investment depth, and credible exit optionality. Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to attract the largest share of capital due to these structural advantages, including IPO pathways alongside M&A opportunities.

Sector focus has narrowed toward repeat-consumption and necessity-driven categories. Food and beverage, health and wellness, value fashion, omnichannel retail, and asset-light business models were highlighted as areas where capital remains active. Investors emphasized that scale alone is no longer sufficient; resilience, cash discipline, and management quality now sit at the center of investment decisions.

FROM MARKET SIZE TO BUSINESS FUNDAMENTALS

A consistent theme was the shift away from market-size-driven investment logic. Where investors once relied heavily on addressable market narratives, today's focus is on operational efficiency, synergy potential, and realistic growth assumptions.

Financial models are being stress-tested more deeply, with increased scrutiny on cost structures, unit economics, and scalability. Capital is no longer deployed in anticipation of rapid exits; instead, investors are underwriting longer holding periods and slower liquidity horizons, adjusting return expectations accordingly.

BRAND EQUITY AND AUTHENTICITY IN LUXURY M&A

In luxury acquisitions, brand equity emerged as the most critical, yet least quantifiable, driver of value. Rather than assigning numerical value to brand equity, investors assess whether it exists, how deeply it is rooted, and whether it can be protected through ownership transitions.

The consensus was clear: acquisition value lies not in the asset alone, but in what the owner is capable of building with it, through management, cultural alignment, and long-term commitment.

GLOBAL VERSUS REGIONAL BUYERS

Differences between global and regional acquirers were also explored. Regional investors typically prioritize strategic fit and local synergies, leveraging their market presence and operational strengths. Global buyers, by contrast, approach acquisitions through portfolio logic, aiming to scale brands across broader platforms and geographies.

Neither approach was positioned as superior. Success depends on clarity of intent, control, and the ability to actively influence outcomes. Minority investments can serve as effective entry points when paired with a clear path to operational influence or eventual control, but passive minority stakes were widely viewed as high-risk.

AI INVESTMENT: FROM HYPE TO MEASURABLE IMPACT

AI investment must be grounded in measurable business outcomes, particularly cost reduction, efficiency gains, and operational improvement. Customer experience alone is no longer sufficient justification for technology investment.

Many so-called AI startups were described as thin integrations of third-party tools rather than owners of proprietary models. By contrast, companies with their own large language models and clear monetization pathways were viewed as materially stronger.

RISK ASSESSMENT AND DUE DILIGENCE ARE DEEPENING

Risk assessment frameworks have expanded significantly. Investors are paying closer attention to balance sheet health, liquidity, exit scenarios, and governance maturity. Financial diligence now routinely includes analysis of cash conversion cycles, foreign exchange exposure, slow-moving inventory, customer acquisition costs, lifetime value, and payback periods.

In retail and consumer investments, patience has become a defining requirement. Venture capital investments were described as requiring 7–10 year horizons, while private equity typically operates on 4–6 year cycles. Misalignment between capital type and business maturity was identified as a frequent source of underperformance.

THE CEO VIEW: CONTROL, CAPABILITY, AND POST-ACQUISITION EXECUTION

Control and capability sit at the center of investment success. Ownership structure is secondary to an investor's ability to influence strategy, talent, and execution. Without the internal capacity to operate and scale an acquired business, risk becomes structural, particularly in luxury, where leadership continuity safeguards brand equity.

Discipline now outweighs speed. In a more selective capital environment, strong fundamentals, credible management, and long-term value creation determine returns.

Risk is not whether you are a minority or a majority. Risk is whether you are able to control the destiny of your investment.

Pierre Mallevays

Speakers: **Tracey Griffin**, CFO, Chalhoub Group / **Heni Jallouli**, Group CFO, Jahez International Company / **Wajid Khan**, Group CFO, Savola Group
Moderator: **Karl Nader**, Partner & Managing Director, AlixPartners

The Retail CFO Agenda

As retail growth becomes more complex and capital more constrained, CFOs are increasingly central to shaping strategy, not just safeguarding margins. How are finance leaders balancing growth, cost discipline, digital investment, and execution excellence across luxury, grocery, and on-demand platforms?

A MARKET OF DIVERGING GROWTH REALITIES

The discussion opened with a clear view of how uneven global retail conditions have become.

Tracey Griffin outlined how parts of the global luxury market experienced low single-digit or even negative growth in 2025, while the Middle East continued to outperform. Across luxury, fashion, and beauty, the region delivered high single-digit to double-digit growth, reinforcing its structural attractiveness.

Within this context, CFOs emphasized the importance of allocating capital toward categories with structural under-penetration.

GROWTH LEVERS BEYOND THE CORE BUSINESS

Across business models, CFOs highlighted diversification and adjacency expansion as essential levers. Wajid Khan described a "triple-A strategy" in FMCG: outperforming existing categories, expanding into adjacencies, and pursuing selective acquisitions supported by strengthened balance sheets.

Store footprint expansion remains a key driver in physical retail. However, expansion alone is no longer sufficient. CFOs stressed that growth must be paired with margin discipline, operational efficiency, and consistent customer experience across the estate.

E-COMMERCE, BUT WITH PROFITABILITY AT THE CORE

E-commerce remains a priority, but profitability now leads the agenda. At Chalhoub Group, Tracey Griffin reported 20%-plus growth in e-commerce across luxury categories, supported by tailored assortments and high-performance last-mile delivery.

Wajid Khan emphasized caution against over-automation and unsustainable models. Hybrid fulfillment approaches are increasingly favored, balancing efficiency with flexibility and cost control.

M&A, CONSOLIDATION, AND COMPETITIVE PRESSURE

Heni Jallouli detailed the acquisition of a 76% stake in Snunu in Qatar as a strategic expansion into a new GCC market, complementing prior greenfield entries in Kuwait and Bahrain. He also highlighted Jahez's portfolio of minority investments across 14 ecosystem companies, positioning them as future consolidation targets.

Competitive pressure is intensifying. Jallouli cited the entry of Meituan into the Saudi market, noting that approximately USD 700–800 million was deployed in subsidies within a single year to gain market share. Rather than competing on price, he emphasized differentiation through delivery experience, multi-vertical expansion, and technology-driven personalization.

DIFFERENTIATION THROUGH EXECUTION AND RELEVANCE

Across sectors, CFOs aligned on execution as the primary differentiator. In luxury, this means highly localized assortments and exceptional last-mile performance. Examples included delivering orders placed at midnight within two hours, supported by white-glove service models designed to preserve brand equity while meeting rising customer expectations.

In grocery, differentiation is rooted in reliability, disciplined pricing, and trusted availability. CFOs were clear that competing directly with hard discounters on price risks eroding brand equity. Instead, success depends on operational consistency, convenience, and maintaining a clear value proposition at scale.

DIGITAL, AI, AND THE CFO'S TEST-AND-SCALE MINDSET

Digitalization and AI are now embedded across CFO agendas, but with a strong emphasis on measurable outcomes. Successful use cases shared during the session focused on logistics optimization, route planning, customer support efficiency, and personalization.

In forecasting and planning, AI tools have delivered material improvements. [One retailer] reported reducing forecast error from above 20% to below 10% for selected brands, enabling more precise capital allocation and inventory management. CFOs emphasized the importance of defining success metrics upfront, scaling what works, and quickly exiting use cases that fail to deliver value.

COST DISCIPLINE AS A GROWTH ENABLER

Rising costs were a shared concern, driven by inflation and increased operating complexity. However, CFOs consistently framed cost not as a target for reduction, but as an investment decision. The prevailing philosophy was "fit for growth": cutting inefficiencies while protecting capabilities that drive customer experience and long-term competitiveness.

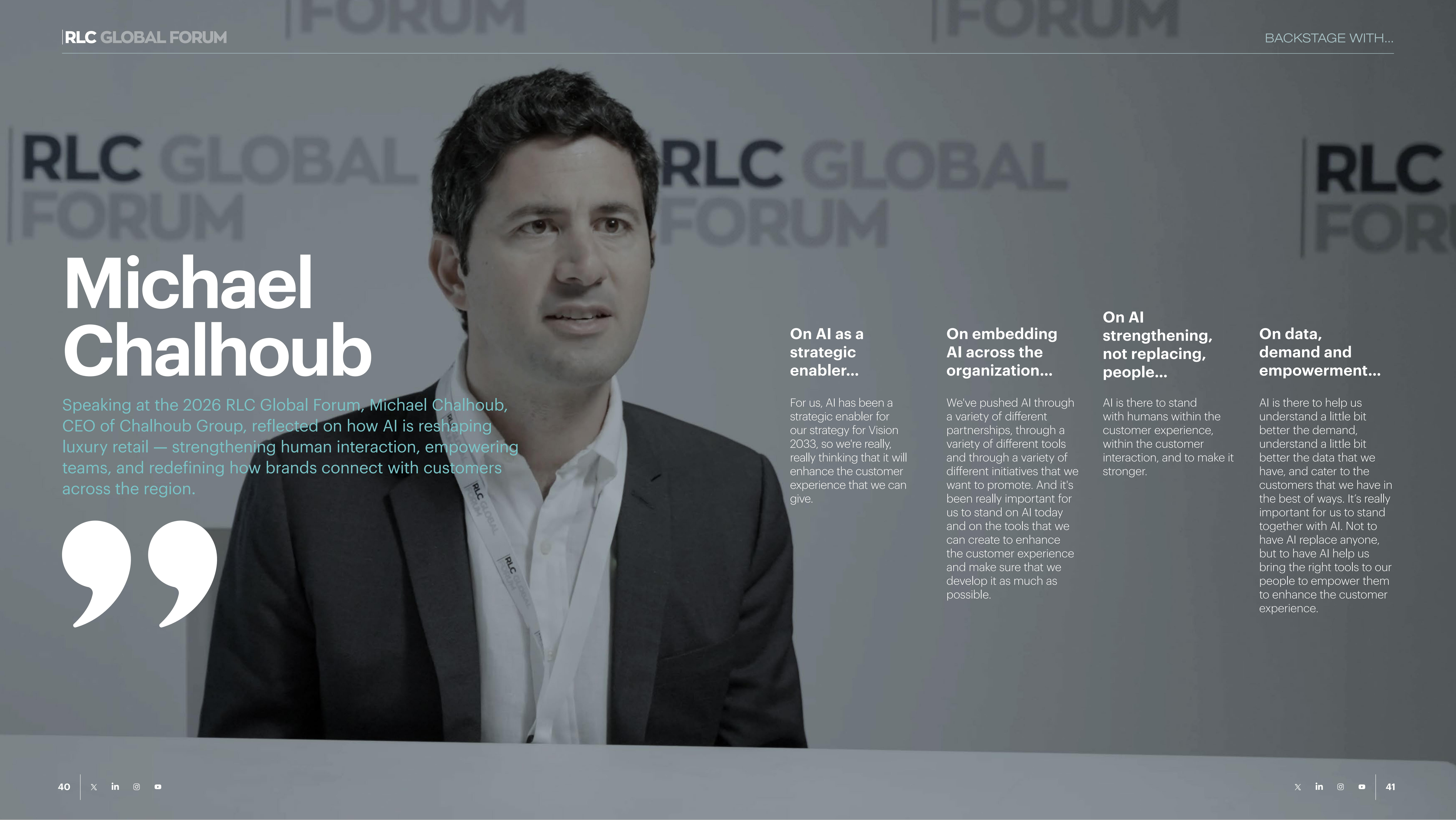
Investments in data, automation, and talent were highlighted as essential to sustaining margins while supporting expansion. Cost discipline, in this context, is about precision rather than austerity.

THE CEO VIEW: DISCIPLINE AS STRATEGY

The modern retail CFO is a growth architect. In a market defined by evolving consumers and intensifying competition, success hinges on disciplined execution, selective investment, and financial rigor paired with operational agility.

We are seeing a shift in market maturity globally. M&A activity is accelerating, with consolidation extending from large players to mid-sized and smaller operators.

Heni Jallouli



Michael Chalhoub

Speaking at the 2026 RLC Global Forum, Michael Chalhoub, CEO of Chalhoub Group, reflected on how AI is reshaping luxury retail — strengthening human interaction, empowering teams, and redefining how brands connect with customers across the region.

On AI as a strategic enabler...

For us, AI has been a strategic enabler for our strategy for Vision 2033, so we're really, really thinking that it will enhance the customer experience that we can give.

On embedding AI across the organization...

We've pushed AI through a variety of different partnerships, through a variety of different tools and through a variety of different initiatives that we want to promote. And it's been really important for us to stand on AI today and on the tools that we can create to enhance the customer experience and make sure that we develop it as much as possible.

On AI strengthening, not replacing, people...

AI is there to stand with humans within the customer experience, within the customer interaction, and to make it stronger.

On data, demand and empowerment...

AI is there to help us understand a little bit better the demand, understand a little bit better the data that we have, and cater to the customers that we have in the best of ways. It's really important for us to stand together with AI. Not to have AI replace anyone, but to have AI help us bring the right tools to our people to empower them to enhance the customer experience.

There is a very stubborn narrative that technology will lead to mass unemployment. But history begs to differ. I think the idea of technological unemployment remains a historical myth.

Philipp Carlsson-Szlezak
Managing Director and Partner, Global Chief Economist, BCG

Panic is temporary. Brands are permanent. If you believe that people will continue to gravitate toward the emotional power of a brand 10, 50, or even 100 years from now, then the best time to invest in a brand is right now, during a time of panic, during a time of uncertainty.

Yehuda Shmidman
Chairman, Founder & CEO, WHP Global

RETAIL REAL ESTATE AND THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

Retail real estate is moving beyond square meters and footfall toward relevance, cultural meaning and emotional pull. As destinations compete for attention in a crowded landscape, retail spaces are being reimagined as engines of urban life, tourism, and experience. Across the GCC, new developments are aligning retail with hospitality, entertainment, and cultural programming to create destinations that sustain engagement rather than simply attract visits. Developers and operators are rethinking tenant mix and the balance between lifestyle, leisure, and commerce. In this evolving model, retail becomes part of a broader ecosystem, supporting tourism strategies, shaping city identity, and anchoring mixed-use environments designed to thrive well beyond traditional shopping patterns.

Speakers: **Alison Rehill-Erguven**, CEO, Cenomi Centers / **Ayman Mohammed Al Burti**, CEO, Azad Properties / **Abdullah Al Tamimi**, CEO, Hamat / **Georges Barakat**, Head of Market & Commercial Strategy - Retail, Local Real Estate Investment Division, PIF

Moderator: **Pauline Coquet**, Partner, Bain & Company Middle East

The Changing Economics of Retail Destinations

As Saudi Arabia's retail sector transitions from rapid expansion to more selective growth, the economics of destination development are being fundamentally reshaped. Industry leaders examined how maturing consumer expectations, demographic shifts, and new public-private dynamics are redefining what makes a retail asset viable, relevant, and valuable over the long term.

A MARKET MOVING FROM SCALE TO INTENTIONALITY

Saudi Arabia's retail market has advanced significantly over the past decade yet remains on an upward maturity curve. Panelists described it as one of "emerging maturity": ambitious in scale, but still developing in infrastructure sophistication, brand depth, and experiential quality. Growth is no longer driven by adding gross leasable area, but by relevance, differentiation, and long-term value creation. More demanding consumers and higher operating standards now require sharper asset positioning. Not every development must be iconic, but each must define a clear role within the broader ecosystem.

CONSUMER EVOLUTION AND DEMAND POLARIZATION

A central theme was the rapid evolution of the Saudi consumer. Demographic shifts—smaller households, an aging population, rising female workforce participation, and higher education levels—have created more diverse segments with distinct expectations, while wealth polarization is reshaping demand. Affluent consumers are growing in number, even as many households become more value-conscious. This divide is pushing developers to recalibrate propositions across the spectrum, from luxury destinations to community-focused assets. Panelists linked consumer maturity directly to retail maturity, noting that rising expectations around experience and convenience require sharper segmentation, curated tenant mixes, and stronger relevance to daily life.

MEASURING MATURITY: INFRASTRUCTURE, BRANDS, AND EXPERIENCE

Market maturity was framed across three dimensions: infrastructure, brand presence, and customer experience. Saudi Arabia remains largely mall-based, but large-scale mixed-use destinations such as Diriyah Square, Westfield developments, and Avenues projects signal a shift toward more experience-led environments. Brand depth has strengthened, though global brand penetration still lags some neighboring markets, requiring continued progress in attracting international players. Service quality has improved, supported by government and workforce initiatives, yet further gains are needed. As one panelist noted, service standards are now decisive in how consumers judge destinations—not a secondary enhancement.

THE ROLE OF PIF AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE COLLABORATION

The Public Investment Fund was positioned as a key catalyst in accelerating the sector's evolution. Rather than focusing solely on retail, PIF prioritizes integrated ecosystems that combine retail, hospitality, residential, and cultural components. Success is measured not only by financial returns, but also by tourism impact, employment generation, and quality-of-life outcomes.

Panelists stressed that the next growth phase depends on close public-private coordination. Ministries overseeing investment, tourism, and human capital play complementary roles in lowering barriers, raising service standards, and increasing visitor spend. Retail destinations are now viewed as national platforms requiring collective stewardship, not standalone commercial assets.

RECONFIGURING THE RETAIL MIX FOR DAILY RELEVANCE

Operators highlighted a shift toward embedding destinations more deeply in everyday life. Retail centers are integrating grocery, medical, wellness, and lifestyle offerings to drive more frequent visits and longer dwell times. This multifunctional approach reflects how consumers increasingly combine errands, leisure, and social interaction in a single trip.

This evolution carries economic implications. Some emerging categories generate lower direct yields, requiring developers to rebalance their models. Strategies include optimizing floorplate design, introducing smaller, flexible units, and expanding non-GLA revenue streams such as digital media, pop-ups, activations, and experiential programming.

SPECIALIZATION AND SCALE AS NEW ECONOMIC LEVERS

New formats such as Souq 7 in Jeddah were presented as examples of specialization at scale. Developed across approximately 700,000 square meters of land with around 400,000 square meters of GLA and more than 3,500 shops, the project is structured around seven integrated retail zones. Guided by principles of variety, value, and experience, early performance indicators pointed to strong footfall and retailer engagement in the initial weeks following opening.

THE CEO VIEW: DISCIPLINE AS GROWTH DRIVER

Saudi Arabia's retail sector is entering a more disciplined era. Growth remains strong, but success will depend on clarity of purpose and alignment with evolving consumer realities. The consensus: destinations that balance experience with economic rigor, supported by coordinated public and private action, will define the next phase of sustainable growth in the kingdom.

Let's build wisely, let's build smartly, let's deliver on what we promised to the people.

Georges Barakat

Speakers: Bruno Wehbe, President - Flagship Assets & New Ventures, Cenomi Centers / **Andrew Williamson**, Senior Retail Development Director, Red Sea Global / **Nermeen Nosseir**, Chief Retail Leasing Officer, Diriyah Company / **Eng. Omar Al-Fayyadh**, Chief Commercial Officer, Alandalus Property

Moderator: Philippe Najjar, Partner, PwC Middle East

The Visitor Economy and the Making of Tomorrow's GCC Destinations

As GCC destinations scale at unprecedented speed, the competitive edge is shifting from asset value to visitor value. Leaders from retail-led flagships, heritage cities, and integrated tourism projects discussed how planning, phasing, and partnership models are evolving to create connected, experience-driven ecosystems.

FROM DESTINATION ASSETS TO CONNECTED VISITORS

The session opened with a shared observation: while investment in large-scale destination assets has accelerated across the GCC, visitor behavior has changed even faster. Panelists highlighted a persistent disconnect between how destinations are traditionally planned and how visitors move, spend time, and engage once on site.

The emphasis has shifted away from simply attracting visitors toward designing experiences that endure experiences that encourage longer stays, repeat visitation, and emotional connection. Public authorities, tourism strategies, developers, retailers, and operators are increasingly aligning around the concept of the "connected visitor," where hospitality, retail, culture, leisure, and mobility converge into a single, coherent journey.

DESIGNING FOR EXPERIENCE QUALITY

From a flagship retail and mixed-use perspective, the discussion underscored that scale alone no longer defines destination success. Experience quality how a visitor feels navigating, dwelling, and returning has become the primary differentiator.

Key levers include the physical openness of assets, access to natural light, intuitive circulation, and environments that extend dwell time without friction. Retail mix was cited as a critical challenge, with panelists acknowledging fatigue from repetitive brand line-ups. In response, strategies now prioritize curated assortments, exclusive concepts, and international standards of service.

One example highlighted the introduction of 50–60 brands and concepts that are either new to the Kingdom or exclusive to specific flagship destinations, reinforcing the idea that differentiation must be deliberate and continuously refreshed. Service design seamless, intuitive, and visitor-centric was positioned as equally important as architecture or tenant mix.

PURPOSEFUL TRAVEL AND END-TO-END JOURNEYS

The conversation then moved beyond urban retail into destination tourism, where visitor expectations are increasingly shaped by purpose. Rather than passive sightseeing, travelers are seeking experiences centered on wellness, culture, nature, sport, and meaning.

Integrated destination models were presented as a response to this shift. By controlling the entire visitor journey from arrival and mobility to accommodation, activities, retail, and dining developers are able to design destinations with distinct identities and intentional narratives. Differentiation between destinations, even within the same portfolio, was emphasized as essential to meeting varied traveler motivations while maintaining consistency in experience quality.

Retail and F&B in these environments are no longer standalone components but extensions of the destination story, often designed to adapt over time through flexible formats, pop-ups, and multi-brand concepts that respond to changing visitor profiles.

PHASING CITIES FOR LONG-TERM RELEVANCE

Long-term destination relevance was explored through the lens of phased development. Large-scale cultural and mixed-use cities require deliberate sequencing to remain dynamic over decades rather than peak at launch.

One fully integrated destination discussed spans 14 square kilometers, comparable in size to Geneva, and is planned to accommodate up to 100,000 residents, alongside global visitors and international workplaces. The destination includes nine museums, cultural landmarks, and major performance venues, supported by over 500,000 square meters of retail.

Early delivery of key assets has already demonstrated momentum, with one retail and cultural precinct surpassing four million visits over three years, while continuing to see year-on-year growth. Phasing was positioned not as a constraint, but as a strategic tool to layer experiences over time, encouraging repeat visitation and sustained relevance.

THE CEO VIEW: MEASURING WHAT TRULY MATTERS

The panel underscored a shift in how destination performance is defined. Footfall and sales remain relevant, but they no longer capture the full picture of success. What matters increasingly is visitor behavior: frequency of return, dwell time, cross-category engagement, and the quality of the journey itself.

Long-term value lies in designing destinations that foster emotional connection, cultural authenticity, and narrative coherence. Retailers and developers must collaborate early to create environments that feel distinct and enduring. The future of the GCC visitor economy will favor destinations that prioritize loyalty, experience, and sustained relevance over transient traffic.

We are confident that a walkable, heritage-driven, experience-led destination will generate sustainable traffic, because it's unique, it's different, and it's what today's visitors seek.

Nermeen Nosseir

Abdullah Al Tamimi

In an interview during the 2026 RLC Global Forum, Abdullah Al Tamimi, CEO of Hamat, shared his perspective on Saudi Arabia's retail evolution, the future of place-making, and how destination development aligned with Vision 2030 is reshaping Mecca's retail landscape.

On the biggest opportunity in Saudi retail...

Our business is not yet mature. There is room for development when it comes to operational excellence, relationship management, refining the leasing strategy, making the right choices, and strengthening partnerships with retailers.

On moving beyond tenant mix...

When we talk about mixed use or tenant mix, it is, let's call it, the entry level of the mall. but when you enter the shopping center, visitors will not only remember the tenants and the brands, but also the experience happening inside the mall

On thinking about the journey...

When we talk about the experience, we need to understand why it matters for people to visit our destination. It's about the entire journey, from the parking to leaving. We think of it holistically and in detail.

On partnership in experience building...

We engage closely with our partners, the tenants, in shaping the offering—from the equipment and rides to the gaming zones and the different age groups they serve. We work to create connections between them and other operators. Rather than having our partners work independently, we stay involved to help the experience evolve even more.

Speakers: Shane Eldstrom, CEO, United Developers Qatar / **Sylvie Freund-Pickavance**, Global Strategy & Business Development Director, Value Retail / **Rahul Prasad**, Managing Director (Asia Pacific, Middle East and India), Pike Preston Partners / **Saleh Almasri**, Director Entertainment Accounts, Cenomi Centers

Moderator: Simon Mitchell, Co-Founder, Sybarite

New Ecosystems of Desire: Building Experiences Through Lifestyle Destinations

Lifestyle destinations are evolving beyond traditional retail and entertainment formats and their success increasingly depends on emotional resonance, cultural relevance, and repeat engagement. How are destinations being designed, curated, financed, and operated as living ecosystems?

FROM DESTINATIONS TO ECOSYSTEMS OF DESIRE

The session opened with a reframing of how lifestyle destinations should be understood. Panelists argued that conventional labels shopping destinations, entertainment hubs, or mixed-use developments, no longer capture the role these places play in people's lives. Today's most successful destinations function as ecosystems of desire: environments people choose to return to because they offer meaning, identity, and emotional connection.

This shift places emphasis not on scale or novelty, but on how a place makes people feel over time. Design, curation, and operation were discussed as

inseparable elements, requiring collaboration between developers, operators, investors, and cultural curators to sustain relevance across decades.

DESIGNING FOR IDENTITY, MEMORY, AND EMOTION

From a development perspective, destinations were described as cultural and civic statements as much as commercial assets. At Place Vendôme in Qatar, architectural scale, natural light, and spatial generosity were intentionally designed to elicit emotional responses rather than simply accommodate footfall. Recognition as the world's most beautiful shopping center in 2024 underscored the role of design in shaping perception and memory. It's highlighted that emotional recall outlasts transactional interactions. Touchpoints such as hospitality rituals, service details, and spatial choreography were positioned as tools to create a sense of belonging, where visitors feel welcomed, valued, and recognized rather than processed

LONG-TERM VISION AND THE PATIENCE TO CURATE

A recurring theme was the importance of long-term investment horizons. In markets such as Qatar, placemaking was framed as part of national ambition, with returns measured not only in financial terms but in tourism, cultural capital, and global positioning.

This patience enables restraint. Rather than maximizing short-term density or activation, developers can allow destinations to evolve deliberately. Continuous reinvention often on multi-year cycles was described as essential to prevent stagnation, ensuring that destinations remain dynamic without losing their core identity.

THE POWER OF WHAT IS LEFT OUT

Curation emerged as a central discipline in sustaining desire. From the perspective of Value Retail's villages, success was attributed as much to exclusion as inclusion. Brand mixes are intentionally edited, with approximately 40% renewed annually, ensuring freshness while preserving familiarity.

Guests are not treated as customers but as hosts, reinforcing a hospitality-led mindset across services, landscaping, and programming. Cultural sensitivity was emphasized, with each destination adapting its experience to different nationalities and expectations, balancing discovery with comfort.

INVESTING IN EMOTION: MEASURING THE INTANGIBLE

From an investor's standpoint, the session addressed a critical question: how to underwrite desire. Traditional retail metrics such as sales per square foot were described as increasingly insufficient for capturing the value of experiential destinations.

Panelists argued that experience reduces risk by increasing emotional loyalty, dwell time, and repeat visitation. However, this requires a shift in mindset from focusing solely on financial destinations to understanding the full journey of the consumer. Emotional return, while intangible, was positioned as a leading indicator of long-term financial performance.

FROM ATTRACTION TO INTEGRATION

In the Saudi context, entertainment now plays a primary role in driving visitation, but success depends on integration rather than excess.

Panelists stressed quality over quantity in tenant mix, blending retail, food, lifestyle, and entertainment to support everyday habits rather than one-off events. Over-programming risks emotional fatigue; repeatability signals success. When destinations become part of daily or weekly routines, they achieve lasting relevance.

Destinations were consistently described as living systems. Standing still was seen as the fastest path to decline. Evolution whether through rotating concepts, new services, or reimagined spaces was positioned as a strategic necessity.

THE CEO VIEW: THE ECONOMICS OF EXPERIENCE

The future of lifestyle destinations lies in belonging, not novelty. The most enduring ecosystems of desire are carefully edited, emotionally intelligent, and designed for repetition. As destinations increasingly compete for time, attention, and values, success will favor those that understand why they exist, evolve with their audiences, and build loyalty through meaning rather than magnitude.

The real success is when places become part of people's routine and behavior. The goal is to create places that people choose, not only once, but again and again.

Saleh Almasri

Speakers: Khalid Aljanahi, Chief Commercial Officer, Cenomi Centers / **Majid Abdullah Algothmi**, Acting CEO, RED Malls / **Artin Malatjalian**, CEO, RASM / **Zamil Alzamil**, Head of Leasing – Commercial Division, SEVEN

Moderator: Ben Chesser, Founder & CEO, Coniq

The Next Chapter for Retail Real Estate

Saudi Arabia's retail real estate sector is entering a decisive new phase, shaped by evolving consumer behavior and changing lifestyles. This session brought together developers and operators actively reshaping assets across the Kingdom to explore how long-term vision and experience-led models are redefining malls and destinations for the next decade.

FROM SHOPPING ASSETS TO LIFESTYLE PLATFORMS

The discussion opened with a clear acknowledgment that retail real estate is no longer defined by shopping alone. Khalid Aljanahi outlined how Cenomi Centers is repositioning its portfolio through the launch of Westfield Riyadh and Westfield Jeddah, two flagship developments designed as lifestyle destinations rather than traditional malls. These assets prioritize entertainment, food and beverage, services, and design-led experiences aimed at increasing dwell time and engagement across multiple consumer segments.

This shift reflects broader changes in consumer behavior, with visitors spending more time seeking social interaction, leisure, and entertainment rather than transactional retail.

REINVENTING EXISTING ASSETS WITH EMOTIONAL EQUITY

Majid Abdullah Algothmi highlighted the importance of emotional equity in legacy assets, using the relaunch of Dhahran Mall as a case study. With more than 20 years of history, the mall holds deep significance for the Eastern Province community. Rather than replacing it, the strategy focuses on renewal through a phased master plan spanning approximately 800,000 square meters.

Phase zero, described as a strategic renewal program, centers on three pillars: strengthening community connection, enhancing experiential quality, and securing long-term profitability.

BALANCING DEVELOPMENT AND OPERATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Artin Malatjalian provided insight into managing both development and operational complexity. At Razim, this dual perspective informs decisions across new developments such as The Point in Abha, now moving into its electromechanical phase, and the planned repositioning of Red Sea Mall in Jeddah.

A key development was the formal inclusion of the landowner, Dallah, as a long-term stakeholder, reinforcing continuity and commitment. This alignment was positioned as essential to sustaining relevance and traffic over time, particularly as competition intensifies and consumer expectations rise.

ENTERTAINMENT AS A PRIMARY TRAFFIC DRIVER

Zamil Alzamil outlined Seven's entertainment-led model, which places experience at the core of real estate value creation. Entertainment was framed not as an add-on, but as the anchor around which food, beverage, and social experiences are built. The objective is to create destinations that serve multiple age groups, from families to thrill-seeking adults, reinforcing repeat visitation and emotional attachment.

COMPETING FOR SHARE OF TIME

A recurring theme was the industry's shift from competing for share of wallet to competing for share of time. Algothmi emphasized that today's retail destinations must earn prolonged and repeat visits by offering meaningful experiences. This requires continuous dialogue with communities, retailers, and customers, supported by market research and behavioral insight.

Design flexibility emerged as a critical enabler. Larger, column-free spaces with higher ceilings were cited as allowing faster adaptation to tenant needs while reducing future capital expenditure. Operational investments such as building management systems were shown to deliver tangible efficiencies, with one example achieving utility cost reductions of approximately 7–10%.

TECHNOLOGY, DATA, AND PRACTICAL AI ADOPTION

The panel addressed the growing role of technology and AI in shaping retail environments. While acknowledging the transformative potential of AI, speakers stressed the importance of relevance and execution. Malatjalian noted that digital tools must be tailored to the realities of brick-and-mortar retail and supported by proven platforms rather than deployed for novelty.

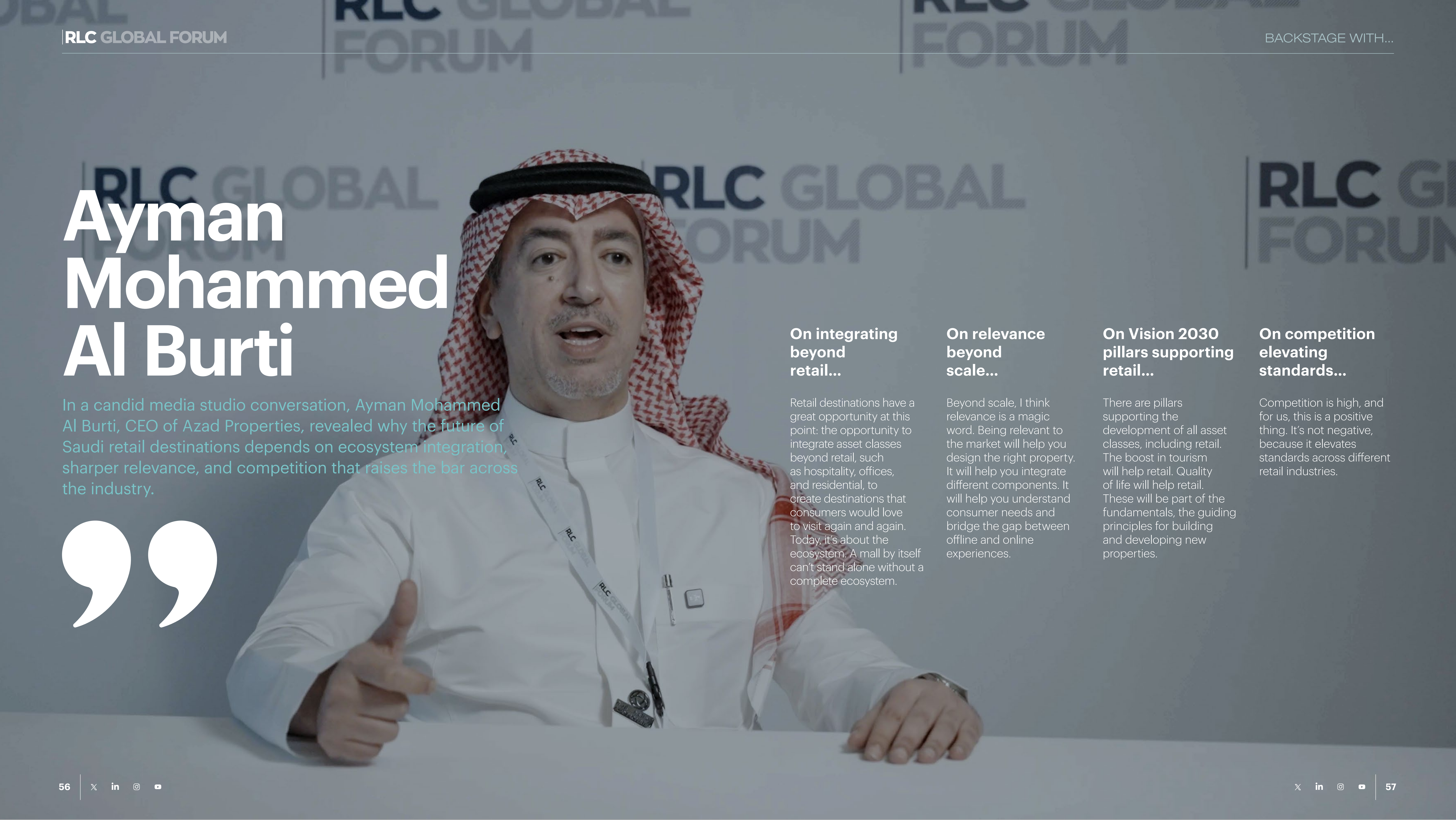
AI was positioned as an analytical enabler, supporting traffic profiling, behavioral insights, and promotional optimization. Algothmi highlighted opportunities to use data to understand visitation patterns, dwell times, and cross-shopping behavior, enabling more targeted programming and tenant support.

THE CEO VIEW: FROM ASSETS TO PLATFORMS

Success depends on strong planning, adaptable teams, and the willingness to evolve without losing strategic clarity. Mistakes are inevitable, but resilience and responsiveness define long-term winners. The overall consensus was clear: the next chapter of retail real estate in Saudi Arabia will be written by destinations that integrate experience, technology, and community at scale.

We used to compete for the shopper's share of wallet. Today, we are competing for the consumer's share of time.

Majid Abdullah Algothmi



Ayman Mohammed Al Burti

In a candid media studio conversation, Ayman Mohammed Al Burti, CEO of Azad Properties, revealed why the future of Saudi retail destinations depends on ecosystem integration, sharper relevance, and competition that raises the bar across the industry.

On integrating beyond retail...

Retail destinations have a great opportunity at this point: the opportunity to integrate asset classes beyond retail, such as hospitality, offices, and residential, to create destinations that consumers would love to visit again and again. Today, it's about the ecosystem. A mall by itself can't stand alone without a complete ecosystem.

On relevance beyond scale...

Beyond scale, I think relevance is a magic word. Being relevant to the market will help you design the right property. It will help you integrate different components. It will help you understand consumer needs and bridge the gap between offline and online experiences.

On Vision 2030 pillars supporting retail...

There are pillars supporting the development of all asset classes, including retail. The boost in tourism will help retail. Quality of life will help retail. These will be part of the fundamentals, the guiding principles for building and developing new properties.

On competition elevating standards...

Competition is high, and for us, this is a positive thing. It's not negative, because it elevates standards across different retail industries.

Speakers: **David Wilkinson**, Executive Director, Steen & Strøm Oslo
Interviewer: **Panos Linardos**, Chairman, RLC Global Forum

The Changing Role of Retail in Urban Life

In a one-on-one conversation, Panos Linardos sat down with David Wilkinson to explore how retail is being redefined within the modern city. Using Oslo's historic Steen & Strøm as a case study, the dialogue examined how commercial assets are evolving into civic anchors.

RETAIL AS URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE

The discussion began with the premise that retail has moved from being a destination in isolation to becoming embedded in the fabric of city life. In dense urban environments, successful retail assets now act as connective tissue between districts, transportation networks, and public space.

At Steen & Strøm, this shift is reflected in strategic physical integration. The opening of a direct connection to Oslo's main pedestrian artery, Karl Johans gate, resulted in an entrance generating more than one million visitors per year. This illustrates how thoughtful urban alignment can reposition a retail asset as a natural extension of the city's circulation rather than a discrete commercial site.

SUSTAINABILITY AND CIVIC PRIORITIES SHAPING RETAIL STRATEGY

Oslo's broader civic priorities strongly influence commercial decision-making. The city's commitment to sustainability has shaped how retail assets operate and evolve.

Steen & Strøm's ESG strategy, in place for over three years, extends beyond reporting to include tangible applications across design, operations, and partnerships. Transparency, supplier engagement, and long-term environmental responsibility are integrated into daily operations, reinforcing the role of retail as a responsible urban participant rather than a purely transactional space.

DESIGNING FOR RELEVANCE AND DWELL TIME

Design and programming choices were highlighted as critical levers for relevance. Food and beverage, in particular, has become central to sustaining footfall and engagement. At Steen & Strøm, dining venues on the ground level are among the highest-performing areas of the store.

A food court located at basement level currently accounts for approximately 20% of annual store revenue, underscoring the role of hospitality in driving both traffic and commercial performance. Plans to relocate this offer to an upper level reflect a broader ambition to continuously reconfigure space in response to evolving consumer behavior and urban needs.

RETHINKING METRICS OF RETAIL SUCCESS

The session challenged traditional metrics as insufficient on their own. While sales, margins, and return on investment remain essential, they no longer fully capture relevance in an urban context.

New measures increasingly focus on ecosystem health: frequency of customer visits, quality of partner relationships, and the wellbeing of teams operating within the retail environment. Drawing on experience from leading global retailers, the discussion emphasized a people-centered framework—prioritizing people, passion, process, and product—as a foundation for long-term performance.

RETAIL AS A CULTURAL ANCHOR

Retail assets that contribute to a city's cultural life create emotional connection and repeat engagement. At Steen & Strøm, partnerships with Oslo Runway, the National Museum, and the International Fashion Library embed the store within the city's creative ecosystem.

Programming initiatives extend beyond formal events. Weekly photographic walks through Oslo, hosted from within the store, attract approximately 80 participants per session, generating dwell time, advocacy, and a sense of community ownership.

COMMUNITY, SAFETY, AND THE URBAN EXPERIENCE

As cities grow more complex, the role of retail in supporting safe, accessible environments is becoming more pronounced. The session noted that freedom of movement, transport infrastructure, and personal safety are increasingly intertwined with commercial success.

Retail assets that collaborate closely with civic authorities can help address these challenges, contributing to vibrant yet secure urban districts.

THE CEO VIEW: IMPLICATIONS FOR INVESTORS AND CITY PLANNERS

The message for investors and city leaders was clear: future-proof retail must be designed as part of a broader urban ecosystem. Public space, transport connectivity, and culturally relevant programming are now essential, not optional.

Retail that thrives in urban life is adaptive, socially engaged, and aligned with the city's values. Capital alone is not enough; long-term success depends on meaningful integration into the civic fabric.

The leading destination for business and lifestyle

At KAFD, our vision for retail is centred on creating a destination where business, lifestyle, and community living come together. We want people to enjoy the district throughout the entire day, whether they are coming to work, meeting friends, dining, or spending time in the public realm.

Retail performs best in mixed-use environments where everyday life takes place. This underpins our approach to retail at KAFD. Retail is integrated into the district's rhythm, serving employees, residents, and visitors, and contributing to a high-quality urban experience.

With an approximate 60/40 split between Retail and F&B, our tenant mix has been deliberately designed to ensure a vibrant and thriving environment throughout the day. We have curated a diverse F&B portfolio, from fine dining to casual and grab-and-go, ensuring accessibility for both the onsite community and visitors. In parallel, essential retail and daily services, including convenience and wellness, ensure that KAFD caters to the needs of the entire community.

The growth has been significant. In just a few years, we have expanded from a small retail base in 2020 to more than 170 brands today, with 60+ retail units already operational and more openings planned. The Design District is a clear example, attracting leading design houses and furniture brands aligned with KAFD's lifestyle positioning.

Looking ahead, our focus remains on placemaking, curating experiences and public spaces that bring people together and elevate the district's identity. KAFD continues to evolve as a cultural and lifestyle destination complementing its role as a leading business hub.

In future phases, we are planning a central retail hub, designed as a walkable, experience-led zone bringing together fashion, culture, and luxury. The ambition is clear: to make KAFD the benchmark for mixed-use retail in Riyadh, where global standards meet local lifestyle.

KAFD IS NO LONGER JUST A PROJECT IN DEVELOPMENT; IT IS A LIVING, BREATHING PROOF-OF-CONCEPT FOR THE FUTURE OF URBAN LIFE IN THE KINGDOM.

Abdulrahman Elbalaa
Retail Leasing & Sales Director, KAFD

Storytelling and cultural context are hugely important. The experience we offer blends what happens locally with a deep understanding of every single guest we welcome. That cultural relevance, rooted in the region where we are based and reflected in how we engage different guests in a highly personalized way, is absolutely critical.

Sylvie Freund-Pickavance
Global Strategy & Business Development Director, Value Retail

When it comes to quality of retail experience, less is more and it's all about the experience. It's all about the right tenant mix. It's all about understanding the profile of the customer. This is the ultimate experience.

Georges Barakat
Head of Market & Commercial Strategy - Retail, Local Real Estate Investment Division, PIF

The experience economy: Competing for time, emotion and loyalty

Retail now competes mostly for attention and emotion, demanding seamless, end-to-end journeys that turn destinations into repeat, loyalty-driven experiences.

We used to compete for the shopper's share of wallet. Today, we are competing for the consumer's share of time.

Majid Abdullah Algothmi
Acting CEO, RED Malls

It is very difficult to offer a great experience in the city if that experience does not carry through to the airport.

Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Alasaker
Chief Commercial Officer, Riyadh Airports Company

The real success is when places become part of people's routine and behavior. The goal is to create places that people choose, not only once, but again and again.

Saleh Almasri
Director Entertainment Accounts, Cenomi Centers

Saudi consumers today are expecting more than just a standalone retail offering, they are going beyond to something experience-led that can be a new social and emotionally driven concept.

Essam Aljubair
Chief Operating Officer, Saudi Entertainment Ventures (SEVEN)

The customer needs more than accommodation; they seek entertainment, transportation, retail, food and beverage, and a fully integrated experience.

Muin Serhan
CEO, Amsa Hospitality

Once a certain level of service is experienced, consumer expectations rise across the board.

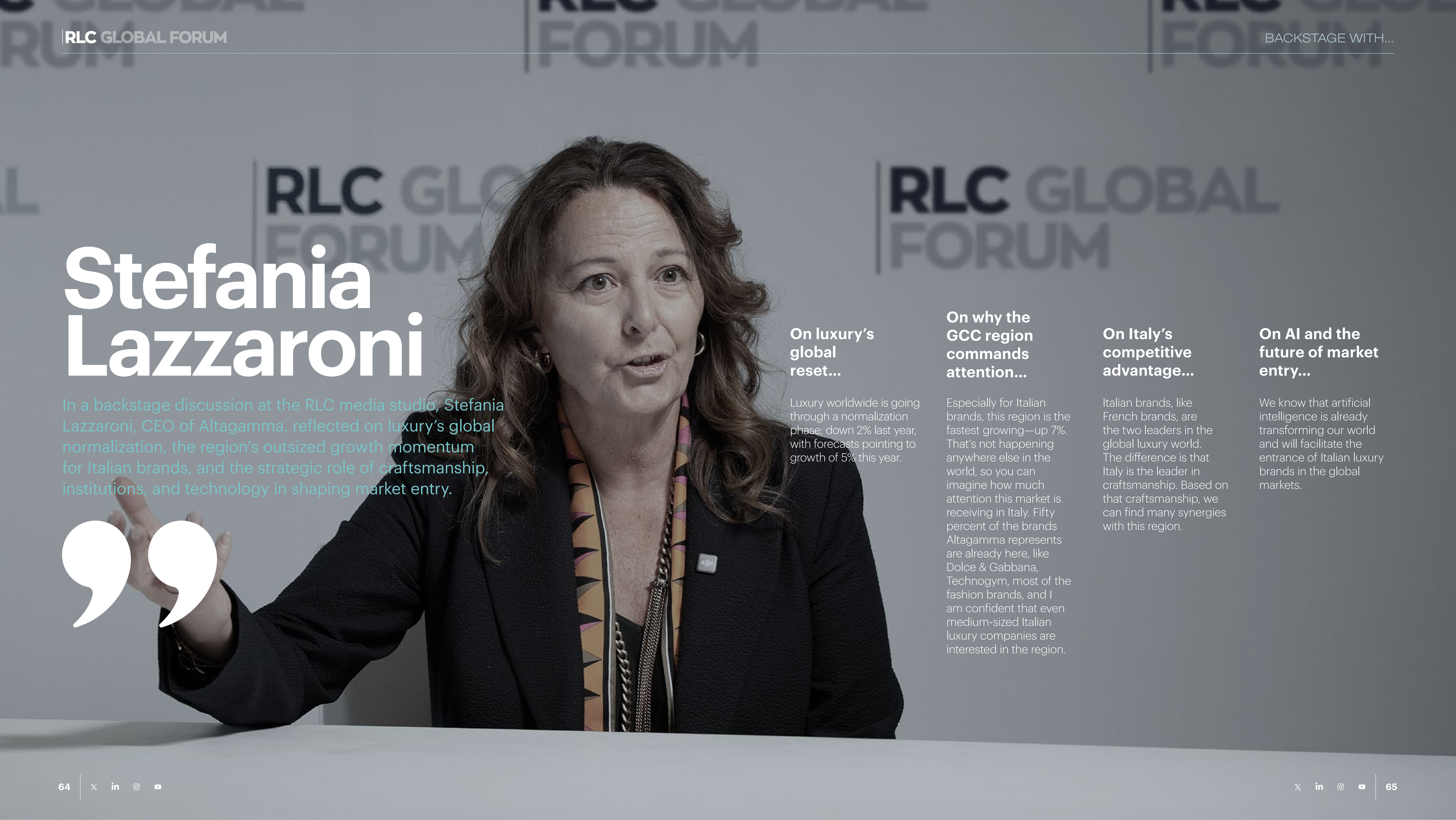
Fares Akkad
Regional Director for MENA, Meta

When we talk about experience, we need to understand why it matters for people to visit our destination. We think of the family, parents, the kids, and the whole household in order to make it a really good experience that is memorable.

Abdullah Al Tamimi
CEO, Hamat

It's not only about the experience that you have inside the airport; it's the experience you have even when you are not traveling.

Vijay Talwar
Chief Commercial & Digital Officer, Avolta



Stefania Lazzaroni

In a backstage discussion at the RLC media studio, Stefania Lazzaroni, CEO of Altagamma, reflected on luxury's global normalization, the region's outsized growth momentum for Italian brands, and the strategic role of craftsmanship, institutions, and technology in shaping market entry.

On luxury's global reset...

Luxury worldwide is going through a normalization phase: down 2% last year, with forecasts pointing to growth of 5% this year.

On why the GCC region commands attention...

Especially for Italian brands, this region is the fastest growing—up 7%. That's not happening anywhere else in the world, so you can imagine how much attention this market is receiving in Italy. Fifty percent of the brands Altagamma represents are already here, like Dolce & Gabbana, Technogym, most of the fashion brands, and I am confident that even medium-sized Italian luxury companies are interested in the region.

On Italy's competitive advantage...

Italian brands, like French brands, are the two leaders in the global luxury world. The difference is that Italy is the leader in craftsmanship. Based on that craftsmanship, we can find many synergies with this region.

On AI and the future of market entry...

We know that artificial intelligence is already transforming our world and will facilitate the entrance of Italian luxury brands in the global markets.

FASHION AND LUXURY'S NEW FRONTIER

Fashion and luxury are navigating a structural and cultural reset after an extraordinary growth cycle. As power shifts, leaders are being forced to reassess what truly sustains value and growth in a more competitive global market. The balance between creativity, capital, distribution, and cultural relevance is being recalibrated across the industry. Multibrand retailers, luxury houses, and emerging markets are reshaping how authority and access are determined. At the same time, new consumer dynamics—from premium travel to the rising influence of the Global South—are expanding where demand originates and how it evolves. The challenge ahead lies in sustaining desirability while managing scale, competition, and changing expectations in a more disciplined luxury environment.

Speakers: **Marco Bizzarri**, Entrepreneur & Investor / **Ingie Chalhoub**, Founder & President, Etoile Group

Moderator: **Panos Linardos**, Chairman, RLC Global Forum

The Business of Luxury

Luxury is entering a more complex phase of maturity, challenging the industry to rethink how value is created, delivered, and sustained. Marco Bizzarri and Ingie Chalhoub examined how value, governance, culture, and regional nuance are redefining performance in a $350 billion global industry.

HOW THE MEANING OF VALUE IN LUXURY HAS EVOLVED

Marco Bizzarri, former President and CEO of Gucci and now a board member and investor across multiple brands, framed the discussion around a fundamental shift in value perception.

Today, scale and speed have transformed that equation. Content volumes are exponential, brands are larger—some exceeding €20 billion in revenues—and digital exposure is constant. As Bizzarri observed, standing out has become "extremely difficult." Value has migrated from product anticipation to curated experience. The consumer expects recognition, personalization, and privileged access.

Segmentation has sharpened between the ultra-wealthy 1% and aspirational customers. The notion of exclusivity must now coexist with global reach. According to Bizzarri, the modern expression of value lies in treating each customer as singular, engineering intimacy at scale.

LEADERSHIP AS THE DECISIVE VARIABLE

When asked what most determines success in today's environment, Bizzarri was unequivocal: leadership.

Luxury remains an emotional business driven by culture and conviction. Creative directors shape aesthetic direction, but CEOs increasingly determine strategic commitment and operational execution.

Bizzarri argued that operational efficiency now carries greater weight than in the past. Even the strongest creative show cannot deliver impact without disciplined execution. The balance of power has evolved; CEOs curate organizations, align teams, and set the tone. For Bizzarri, the luxury CEO of the future requires empathy, authenticity, and the ability to create environments where creativity thrives without fear.

THE MIDDLE EAST: YOUTH, INFLUENCE AND HUMAN CAPITAL

Ingie Chalhoub, Founder and President of Etoile Group, offered a regional lens grounded in decades of experience introducing luxury brands to the Middle East.

In earlier years, the primary challenge was accessibility. Brands were not physically present; consumers purchased luxury while traveling. Logos signaled status and visibility was paramount. Today, accessibility is universal. The strategic shift has moved from repetition and logo visibility to influence and experiential depth.

Chalhoub emphasized the demographic distinction of the GCC. The region's youthful population is not merely consuming trends but setting them. Younger consumers have immediate access to global luxury and expect relevance, curation, and localized storytelling.

A defining differentiator in the Middle East remains the primacy of human relationships. Chalhoub described how service models are built around personal engagement and trust, even as e-commerce expands. AI may support personalization, but human connection anchors loyalty. Leaders must translate global brand DNA into locally resonant experiences across Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and beyond, balancing consistency with contextual adaptation. Trust between brand principals and regional operators underpins long-term success.

SLOWER GROWTH, SHARPER COMPETITION

Luxury's recent deceleration framed part of the discussion. Bizzarri contextualized the slowdown within the industry's scale: even a 1% or 2% contraction operates within a $350 billion global market. The era of double-digit growth fueled by China's expansion may not repeat at the same velocity. India may contribute, but not at China's historical pace.

The competitive dynamic is shifting toward market share battles. Pricing escalations post-COVID, combined with event-driven demand spikes, have strained aspirational segments. Younger consumers have become more selective, with some disengaging from luxury amid rapid price hikes.

Brand positioning rests on two pillars: immutable values and the external environment. Heritage must be preserved, but aesthetics, communication, and distribution must evolve alongside changing consumer habits.

Ingie Chalhoub reinforced that agility at the leadership level is non-negotiable. Respecting craftsmanship and brand ideology while executing locally with precision defines competitive advantage. Seamless journeys, operational discipline, and trusted partnerships will differentiate winners.

THE CEO VIEW: THE GOVERNANCE OF ASPIRATION

Luxury has entered a more disciplined era. Scale now demands sharper governance, cultural cohesion, and strategic clarity. Regional nuance carries equal weight to global brand equity, and resilience depends on aligned organizations capable of consistent execution.

Technology will enhance precision, but emotional capital remains the true driver of value. Growth will be harder won, with advantage accruing to brands that balance immutable identity with operational excellence and decisive stewardship.

If you want to protect margins in the future, you must ensure that the human side prevails over technology, regardless of the artificial intelligence you implement.

Marco Bizzarri

Speaker: **Burak Çakmak**, CEO, Saudi Fashion Commission

Interviewer: **Lynn Al Khatib**, Executive Coach & Vice President of Communications, Chalhoub Group

Fashion and the Balance of Power

Saudi Arabia's fashion sector is entering a new phase of influence and institutional strength. In dialogue with Lynn Al Khatib, Burak Çakmak of the Saudi Fashion Commission, explored how coordinated policy, talent development, and global partnerships are repositioning the Kingdom as both a competitive market and a creator of cultural value.

SAUDI ARABIA'S EMERGENCE AS A FASHION POWER CENTER

Over the past five years, Saudi Arabia has transitioned from being largely undefined on the global fashion map to becoming a recognized destination for retail, talent, and brand development. This transformation has been driven by coordinated action across government entities, regulators, and industry stakeholders, all focused on enabling fashion as both a cultural expression and an economic sector.

At the heart of this shift is an intentional effort to build a complete ecosystem that allows fashion businesses to operate and scale with confidence.

FASHION'S GROWING ECONOMIC AND EMPLOYMENT IMPACT

The sector's expanding influence is reflected in its economic footprint. Fashion and beauty currently employ approximately 340,000 people across Saudi Arabia, with women representing around 55% of the workforce. As of 2025, the sector contributes 2.6% of national GDP, positioning it as a meaningful pillar of economic diversification.

Looking forward, projections indicate strong momentum, with the fashion and beauty market expected to reach approximately USD 40 billion by 2029. Interest in careers within the sector continues to grow, outpacing many other industries and reinforcing fashion's role as a magnet for Saudi talent.

THE ROLE OF THE FASHION COMMISSION

The Saudi Fashion Commission has played a central role in shaping this trajectory. As a dedicated government entity focused solely on fashion, the Commission has prioritized talent and brands while building the surrounding ecosystem required for long-term growth.

One of its flagship initiatives, Saudi 100 Brands, now in its fourth year, supports more than 100 local brands annually, helping them scale domestically and expand internationally. This sustained effort has begun to change global awareness, with Saudi brands increasingly recognized beyond the Kingdom.

Education has been another cornerstone. The establishment of Istituto Marangoni as a foreign direct investment reflects a strategic commitment to embedding world-class education locally, ensuring that skills development evolves in parallel with market growth.

BUILDING VISIBILITY, ACCESS, AND GLOBAL CONNECTIVITY

Visibility and access to global markets have been accelerated through platforms such as Riyadh Fashion Week, now open to the public and featuring both local and international brands. Saudi fashion's presence has also expanded through engagement at Paris and Milan Fashion Weeks, alongside international investment roadshows in cities including London, Paris, and Tokyo.

STRENGTHENING THE LOCAL FASHION ECOSYSTEM

Burak Çakmak also emphasized the importance of building local depth. Many Saudi brands continue to operate primarily through direct-to-consumer models, reflecting both market maturity and consumer behavior. The focus now is on expanding capabilities without eroding these strengths.

Initiatives such as the Fashion Lab provide advanced product development, sampling, and prototyping within the Kingdom, while sourcing services help brands navigate global production networks.

UNDERSTANDING THE SAUDI CONSUMER

Data shows that quality is the primary purchase driver, alongside a growing desire to support local brands. Urbanization, changing lifestyles, and increased workforce participation are reshaping shopping habits, particularly in major cities like Riyadh.

Cultural and seasonal moments remain central. Ramadan continues to be a critical period, but purchasing behavior extends across daily social occasions, Eid, and post-Eid travel. Additional moments require strategies tailored specifically to the Saudi calendar and consumer mindset.

SUSTAINABILITY AS AN EMBEDDED PRIORITY

Sustainability was positioned as an integrated enabler of growth. Large-scale initiatives include the recycling of five tons of garments collected during Hajj and transformed into new products for pilgrims.

Innovation in materials is also underway. Through partnerships with KAUST, seaweed from the Red Sea has been converted into a new fiber, with pilot garments already produced. Plans for 2026 include scaling production to 400 meters of fabric, with the ambition of positioning Saudi Arabia as a source of new sustainable materials for global fashion brands.

THE CEO VIEW: BUILDING POWER THROUGH ALIGNMENT

The session underscored a shared consensus: power in fashion increasingly belongs to ecosystems that align talent, data, culture, and consumer insight. Saudi Arabia's coordinated approach demonstrates how institutional leadership and market openness can accelerate sector maturity.

Speakers: **Mohamad ElAnsari**, CEO, Trendyol Gulf / **Nasiba Hafiz**, Owner and Designer, NH
Moderator: **Nez Gebreel**, Founder, The Arc Bureau

The Platform for Local SME Growth in Saudi

Saudi Arabia's economic diversification agenda is creating new momentum for SMEs as engines of job creation, cultural expression, and GDP growth. The discussion explored how digital platforms, policy reform, and new partnership models are enabling Saudi fashion entrepreneurs to scale sustainably without sacrificing creative identity.

SMES AS THE BACKBONE OF A DIVERSIFYING ECONOMY

The session opened with a shared recognition that SMEs are foundational to long-term economic resilience. Globally, small and medium-sized enterprises anchor local communities and often evolve into family-owned champions or listed companies. In Saudi Arabia, the SME landscape has expanded rapidly over the past decade, supported by Vision 2030 reforms, improved access to capital, and growing consumer openness to homegrown brands.

Fashion was highlighted as a particularly dynamic segment. The sector's contribution to GDP has increased markedly, rising from 1.4 in 2021–22 to 2.6 by 2024, effectively doubling in a short period. This growth reflects not only institutional support through initiatives such as the Fashion Commission and Riyadh Fashion Week, but also a cultural shift toward valuing local creativity.

THE SAUDI CONSUMER AND THE RISE OF LOCAL PRIDE

From the designer's perspective, the evolution of the Saudi consumer has been decisive. Increased pride in buying local brands accelerated after COVID has translated into tangible commercial opportunity. Consumers are more willing to support Saudi designers, not as a niche choice, but as a statement of identity and quality.

This shift has been reinforced by greater visibility for local talent, stronger storytelling platforms, and a more sophisticated retail environment.

PLATFORMS AS GROWTH ENABLERS

A central theme of the session was the evolving role of digital platforms in SME growth. Trendyol Gulf positioned itself as a long-term growth enabler. With three to four million customers in Saudi Arabia and daily order volumes reaching approximately 200,000, the platform offers SMEs access to scale that would otherwise require prohibitive investment.

Trendyol's model focuses equally on the consumer and the merchant. By connecting around 250,000 merchants globally to roughly 40 million customers across 20–25 markets, the platform has built a foundation that allows local brands to reach regional and international audiences while retaining control over their storefronts and brand positioning.

OPERATIONAL SCALE MEETS LOCAL INTELLIGENCE

For many SMEs, the toughest transition is moving from creativity to scalable operations. Designers often juggle sourcing, production, logistics, and sales, slowing growth and diluting focus. The partnership model discussed addresses this by shifting manufacturing, procurement, fulfillment, and digital merchandising to platforms like Trendyol—freeing founders to concentrate on product and brand. At the same time, localization has become a structural priority: while 100% of sales were cross-border two years ago, around 60% now come from local retailers. Combined with access to data, AI-driven insights, and demand analytics, SMEs can scale with greater precision—making smarter decisions on pricing, product, and inventory rather than relying on instinct alone.

3–4 million customers

in Saudi Arabia are served by Trendyol Gulf, with approximately **200,000 orders** processed daily

60% of current sales on Trendyol Gulf come from local retailers

PRESERVING BRAND INTEGRITY

A persistent concern among SMEs is that scale erodes identity. The session pushed back on that assumption. Scale and brand integrity are not opposing forces—if structure and control are deliberate.

A hybrid model offers balance: mono-brand channels for limited drops and high-expression collections, combined with platform distribution for reach and acquisition. The key is ownership. When merchants retain control over pricing, presentation, and positioning, platforms become growth infrastructure.

THE CEO VIEW: THE SAUDI OPPORTUNITY

Scale in Saudi Arabia is becoming a question of timing as much as capability. Consumer demand is deepening, institutional support is active, and digital infrastructure is fully deployable. The ecosystem can now absorb ambition.

Trendyol Gulf's message was pragmatic: hybrid growth provides leverage. Designers protect brand equity and creative control, while platforms handle traffic, technology, logistics, and cross-border reach. For Saudi SMEs, the opportunity it is to institutionalize growth, turning local relevance into sustained regional presence.

As an SME owner, I wear so many hats and end up doing everything. Working with Trendyol took a huge load off my shoulders and allowed me to focus on my favorite part of being a designer: the creativity.

Nasiba Hafiz

Speaker: Emanuela Prandelli, PhD, LVMH Professor of Fashion and Luxury Management, Bocconi University

Leading Fashion in the Age of AI

Emanuela Prandelli, PhD, framed AI as a strategic inflection point for luxury. In a market reshaped by polarization and price pressure, she argued that intelligent technologies can restore balance, re-engaging aspirational consumers, sharpening operational discipline, and unlocking new creative value.

THE STRUCTURAL SHIFT IN THE GLOBAL FASHION MARKET

The presentation opened with a structural diagnosis of the fashion market, tracing its shift from a traditional pyramid to an hourglass shape. Consumers initially drove this change by mixing high-end and mass-market purchases without stigma. More recently, inflation and higher taxation have com-

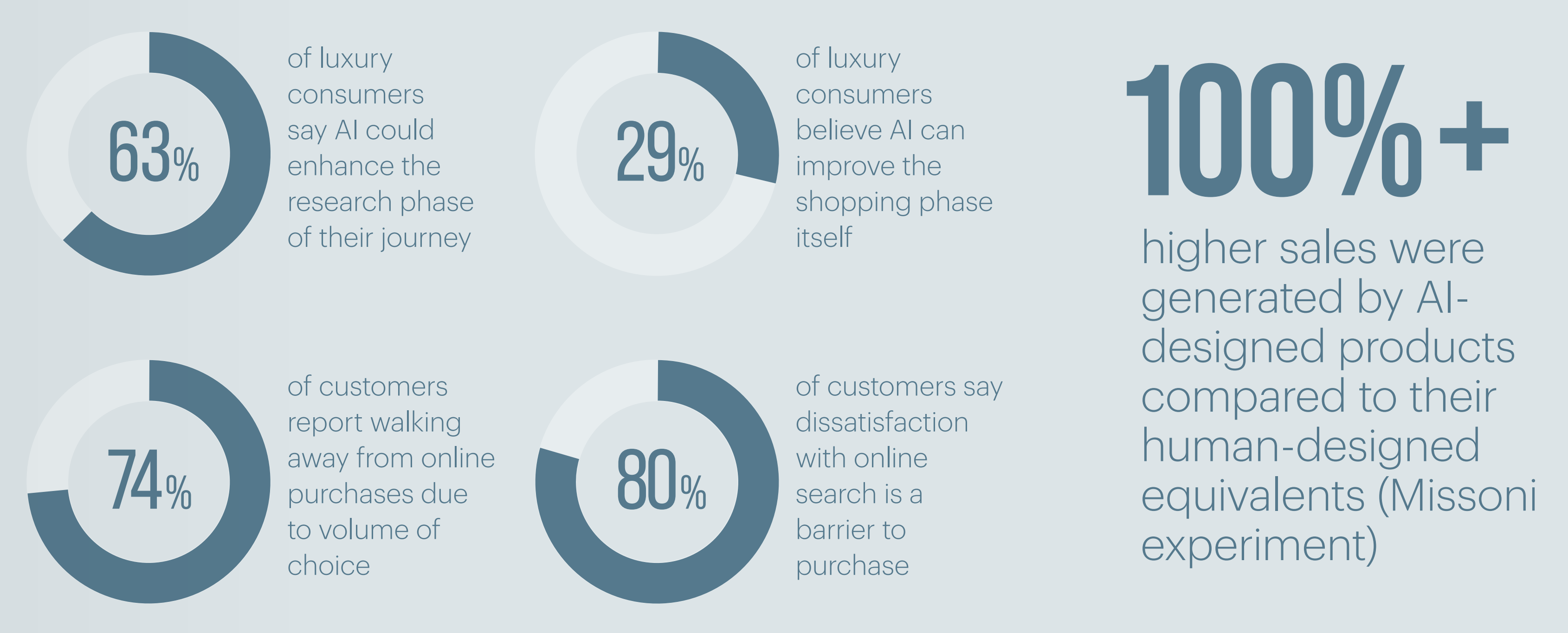
pressed discretionary spending, hollowing out the middle and pushing volume downward.

In response, luxury brands have concentrated on a narrow group of ultra-high-net-worth clients (VICs). While this segment generates a disproportionate share of revenue, the strategy has created tension: costly personalization, lower volumes, and repeated price increases have further thinned the market's center.

RE-ENGAGING THE ASPIRATIONAL CONSUMER THROUGH AI

A central theme of the presentation was the need to reconnect with aspirational consumers who have gradually disengaged as luxury pricing escalated. Many of these customers have redirected spending toward experiences or second-hand markets, creating both a challenge and an opportunity for brands.

AI was presented as a scalable mechanism to re-engage this segment without replicating the cost-intensive, human-led personalization reserved for top-tier clients. Younger consumers and those spending approximately USD 2,000–5,000 annually were identified as particularly receptive to AI-enabled interactions, making them a natural entry point for technology-driven customer relationship strategies.



PREDICTIVE AI AND THE REINVENTION OF CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Predictive AI emerged as a central lever for strengthening CRM effectiveness. By combining transaction history with richer behavioral data, brands can drive more precise upselling and cross-selling at the individual level.

However, Ms. Prandelli noted added complexity in an industry marked by frequent creative director changes. New creative leadership can reactivate some consumers while distancing others, requiring predictive models to adapt as brand aesthetics shift.

Natural language processing was highlighted as a critical enhancement, enabling brands to interpret conversations across chatbots, messaging platforms, email, reviews, and in-store interactions. At scale, this qualitative data sharpens churn prediction and targeted reactivation. Look-alike algorithms further extend this capability, helping brands identify high-potential prospects and deploy attention more efficiently.

FROM PERSONALIZATION TO CONTEXTUAL PRECISION

Beyond behavior, the presentation explored how AI can integrate location intelligence to refine customer profiling. Granular, block-level data—combined with individual purchasing patterns—allows brands to identify emerging high-potential consumers before they formally enter top-tier segments.

Conversational commerce was presented as another transformative layer. AI-driven search and filtering now enable consumers to articulate intent in nuanced, descriptive terms, improving navigation and increasing conversion rates in crowded digital environments. Image recognition, virtual try-on technologies, and experience customization were also discussed as ways to enhance engagement.

Operational Efficiency, Sustainability, and Brand Equity

Advanced demand forecasting enables more accurate production planning, improved inventory management, and reduced excess stock. These efficiency gains carry significant strategic implications. Lower reliance on off-price channels protects brand desirability, while reduced overproduction supports sustainability objectives. The session positioned operational AI not simply as a cost lever, but as a contributor to long-term brand equity and consumer trust.

GENERATIVE AI AS A CATALYST FOR CREATIVE VALUE

Rather than replacing human designers, AI was framed as a complementary tool that helps decode brand archives, surface enduring creative codes, and support new creative leadership transitions.

A concrete case study illustrated this potential. In a co-creation initiative conducted with Missoni, AI-generated designs derived from discarded crowd-sourced ideas were commercialized alongside human-designed products. The AI-designed items outperformed their human counterparts by more than 100% in sales, demonstrating AI's capacity to unlock latent creative value that would otherwise be lost.

THE CEO VIEW: INTELLIGENT LEADERSHIP

AI represents a strategic instrument for restoring balance in the luxury fashion ecosystem. By enabling scalable personalization, sharper operational discipline, and expanded creative possibilities, AI allows brands to nurture both exclusivity and accessibility. Long-term leadership in fashion will belong to those who integrate AI thoughtfully, protecting human creativity while extending relevance, resilience, and growth across the full spectrum of consumers.

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Carlo Capasa

Carlo Capasa stands at the institutional heart of Italian fashion. As Chairman of the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana, he represents an industry that generates over €100 billion in turnover and ranks as Italy's second-largest sector. In a one-on-one conversation with Panos Linardos, he offered a clear-eyed assessment of a fashion system navigating geopolitical tensions, supply chain recalibration, shifting demand, and a rebalancing of global growth.

For him, the current moment is a structural transition and the task ahead, strategic: strengthening governance, reinforcing supply chain transparency, and anchoring growth in long-term responsibility rather than short-term results.

FASHION AT AN INFLECTION POINT

Geopolitical tensions, tariff uncertainty, and uneven consumer confidence are redrawing fashion's global map. For Capasa, scale is now inseparable from governance and supply chain control.

"Today, the question of scale is closely linked to the ability to govern the supply chain and to make it more transparent and structured."

The past two years have been challenging, with an 8 percent contraction across 2024 and 2025. Still, he sees 2026 as stabilizing. Volatility remains a constraint, but also a catalyst: "We have to take volatility and say, what can we build on that?"

RETHINKING THE VALUE CHAIN

Pressure on traditional luxury department stores signals a deeper transformation of fashion's value chain. As many brands shift from wholesale to direct distribution, control over narrative and margin has moved upstream.

Yet Capasa believes department stores remain vital, provided they sharpen their proposition. *"Department stores remain an important part of the ecosystem. But the future of those department stores depends very much on their ability to offer quality, curation, service."*

His call is clear: *"They have to go back to research and make their stores interesting again. Places you visit to find something unexpected, something new."*

A MULTIPOLAR FASHION WORLD

One of the most significant structural shifts underway is the rise of new growth engines beyond traditional centers of demand. The GCC and the broader Middle East are not only expanding as consumer markets, but increasingly emerging as creative and strategic hubs.

As Capasa put it, *"We must be global, but we must be local at the same time."*

In this increasingly multipolar context, cultural sensitivity becomes decisive. *"Brands have to focus more on understanding local context, tradition, relationship dynamics."* Growth, he suggests, must be reciprocal; *"an important relation of give and get."*

Made in Italy, built on craftsmanship and long-standing international partnerships, must continue to adapt, remaining coherent in its values while responsive to regional nuance.

TRANSPARENCY AS A STRATEGIC PILLAR

Looking ahead, Capasa's priorities for the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana are clear: traceability, sustainability, and supply chain integrity.

Consumers purchasing high-end products increasingly demand certainty, not only about quality, but about origin and process. As he stated, *"We want to be sure that every consumer, if they buy a very high-end product, traceability must be at the center. We have to know where it's coming and all the process to produce this product."*

On Italy's system, he was direct: *"The Italian supply chain is quite transparent. In fact, if there is a little problem, you see immediately."*

CREATIVITY AND EDUCATION

For Capasa, governance alone is not enough. At the center of fashion must remain creativity.

He expressed concern about the rise of ultra-fast fashion among younger generations, products often disconnected from quality, craftsmanship, and social responsibility. The industry, he believes, has a cultural duty to respond. *"At the center of everything must be creativity."*

That responsibility extends beyond production to education. *"We have to work on the cultural side, on education, because we have to educate people on the value of creativity, the value of quality—especially the new generation."*

For Carlo Capasa, safeguarding the future of fashion means reinforcing appreciation for design excellence, craftsmanship, and responsible creation.

STABILITY THROUGH VALUES

As fashion navigates a more fragmented, polycrisis world, Capasa returns consistently to fundamentals: quality, creativity, and shared responsibility. Volatility may be unavoidable, but direction must remain steady.

As he put it, *"We have to build our future on the understanding that everything could be different tomorrow. But that must not take us away from our roots."*

Those roots, he stressed, are clear: *"Good quality, clear messages, and strong creativity. These are the values, and they are the ones we must share across the board, with all the players."*

Speakers: Luca Solca, Managing Director and Global Head of Luxury Goods, Bernstein / **Fahed Ghanim**, CEO, Majid Al Futtaim – Lifestyle

Moderator: Jakob Jensen, Managing Director & Partner, BCG

Luxury After the Boom: Relevance, Value, and Growth in a Changed World

Following one of the most unprecedented expansion cycles in luxury history, the sector has entered a more complex and uneven phase. This high-level discussion examined how luxury brands are recalibrating after the post-pandemic boom, exploring shifts in consumer value perception, pricing, and relevance, and assessing where sustainable growth will come from.

REASSESSING THE POST-PANDEMIC BOOM

The discussion opened with a reflection on the extraordinary post-COVID surge in luxury demand. Luca Solca and Fahed Ghanim agreed that much of the boom was cyclical rather than structural, driven by pent-up demand, excess savings, and buoyant financial markets. As inflation and cost-of-living pressures intensified—particularly in the US—and

China's middle-class recovery stalled amid a real estate slowdown, demand softened materially in 2024 and 2025.

This recalibration exposed vulnerabilities in how some brands interpreted the boom. Significant price increases, particularly in leather goods and fashion, accelerated short-term growth but reduced accessibility for aspirational consumers.

THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE QUESTION OF ASPIRATION

A central theme was the role of the middle-class consumer, which still accounts for approximately two-thirds of luxury spending globally. While ultra-high-net-worth clients remain critical, brands cannot rely solely on the top end without risking stagnation.

Luxury's long-term health depends on its ability to recruit, nurture, and retain aspirational consumers. When price escalation outpaces perceived value, brands risk exclusion by accident rather than design.

VALUE CREATION BEYOND PRICE AND STATUS

Consumers increasingly scrutinize craftsmanship, heritage, storytelling, and cultural relevance. There is a growing expectation that brands clearly articulate why their products merit their price points.

Panelists stressed that value must be expressed across the full chain—from product integrity and craftsmanship to personalized service and meaningful brand narratives. Cultural relevance, whether through regional moments such as Ramadan or global touchpoints like sports and entertainment, was cited as a key lever for maintaining resonance without diluting identity.

SERVING POLARIZED WEALTH SEGMENTS

Wealth polarization is reshaping the luxury landscape, presenting both opportunity and complexity. Certain categories, particularly jewelry, are structurally better positioned to serve a wide spectrum of consumers. Entry price points can begin around €1,000, while high jewelry pieces can exceed €20–50 million, allowing brands to remain relevant across income tiers.

Other categories face tighter constraints. In handbags, for example, price ceilings are more defined, and ubiquity risks eroding desirability. Panelists emphasized that luxury's promise rests on making consumers feel distinct; when products become too widely owned, that promise weakens.

LOCALIZATION WITHOUT LOSING GLOBAL IDENTITY

As luxury brands operate across increasingly fragmented markets, localization has become essential rather than optional. Both Luca Solca and Fahed Ghanim highlighted the importance of balancing global brand DNA with regional nuance. Examples included curated collections for Chinese New Year or Ramadan, and limited editions that subtly reference local culture while remaining unmistakably aligned with the brand's core identity.

Successful localization was framed as a disciplined act of adaptation rather than reinvention. Consumers increasingly expect brands to acknowledge their cultural context while delivering consistent global standards of quality and design.

CULTURAL PLATFORMS AND NEW VISIBILITY CHANNELS

Sports, entertainment, and large-scale cultural events were identified as powerful platforms for relevance and recruitment. From Formula One to global sporting tournaments, these moments now serve as convergence points for global audiences. Brands leveraging these platforms are accessing new consumers while reinforcing lifestyle relevance.

The discussion acknowledged the tension between visibility and desirability, but concluded that when executed with clarity and purpose, cultural participation strengthens emotional connection rather than commoditizing luxury.

EXECUTION, INNOVATION, AND BRAND DISCIPLINE

Looking ahead, panelists agreed that execution excellence will increasingly separate winners from losers. In a slower growth environment, innovation must be meaningful, aligned with brand DNA, and translated into products consumers perceive as indispensable.

Creative renewal remains central, but it must be supported by disciplined pricing, coherent storytelling, and consistent client experience.

THE CEO VIEW: REBUILDING RELEVANCE

Luxury is entering a more demanding phase defined by discernment rather than momentum. Growth after the boom will favor brands that re-engage aspirational consumers, articulate value with clarity, and execute flawlessly across markets. Relevance, trust, and disciplined innovation will define the next era of luxury leadership.

Our industry exists because we are promising people that if they buy our products, they become special.

Luca Solca

Speakers: **Isabell Hendrichs**, Managing Director Multibrand, Chalhoub Group
Sebastian Suhl, CEO, END. Clothing

Moderator: **Selvane Mohandas du Ménil**, Managing Director, IADS

The New Power Play in Multibrand Retail

In a region where fashion growth is accelerating and consumer expectations are rising, multibrand retail is reasserting its strategic edge. Leaders from Chalhoub Group and END. Clothing explored how sharper curation, disciplined inventory management, and hybrid physical-digital ecosystems are redefining profitability and relevance.

MARKET CONTEXT: WHY MULTIBRAND STILL MATTERS

Fashion in the GCC reached USD 85 billion in 2024 and is projected to grow to USD 127 billion by 2030, representing approximately 7% annual growth. Despite this momentum, the region remains dominated by monobrand formats, with only a limited number of department stores serving a rapidly expanding, fashion-literate consumer base. Against this backdrop, the panel framed multibrand retail not as a legacy model, but as a strategic platform capable of aggregation, discovery, and cultural translation—functions that single brands increasingly struggle to deliver alone at scale.

CURATION AS STRATEGY: REDUCING NOISE TO INCREASE VALUE

Sebastian Suhl, CEO of END Clothing, positioned curation as the defining competitive advantage of multibrand retail. With 80% of END's business online and 20% offline, the company has deliberately reduced assortment complexity to eliminate redundancy and sharpen differentiation. The objective is not fewer choices, but more intentional ones—aligning brands, products, and exclusives with clear customer expectations.

By focusing on evergreen products, exclusive collaborations, and tightly edited brand portfolios, END has reduced markdown exposure while reinforcing its identity as a cultural and editorial authority.

LUXURY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: DEPTH OVER SPEED

Isabel Hendrichs, Managing Director of the Multibrand Channel at Chalhoub Group, emphasized that luxury in the Middle East is defined less by immediacy and more by relationship depth. Serving very important clients (VICs) requires anticipation, discretion, and personalization rather than transactional efficiency.

Operating a 10,000-square-meter flagship in Abu Dhabi, the Chalhoub multibrand model prioritizes curated journeys, intentional delivery, and long-term engagement. The value proposition lies in knowing the customer deeply and making them part of the experience, rather than optimizing purely for throughput or speed.

PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL: A REINFORCING, NOT COMPETING, SYSTEM

Both speakers rejected the notion that physical retail is merely an acquisition funnel for digital. Instead, they described a hybrid model in which each channel strengthens the other.

For END, physical stores remain central to brand expression, cultural activation, and profitability, despite the business being predominantly digital. Store performance has demonstrated that certain forms of engagement—community building, storytelling, and experiential retail—remain uniquely physical.

For Chalhoub, digital is an extension of service rather than a parallel channel. The hybrid approach allows VIC relationships initiated in store to continue seamlessly across touchpoints, reinforcing loyalty while maintaining productivity discipline.

PROFITABILITY AND MARKDOWN DISCIPLINE

Inventory risk remains one of multibrand retail's structural pressures, but both leaders stressed that execution determines brand impact. Chalhoub manages end-of-season sales through invitation-only access, controlled environments, and tightly curated assortments to preserve equity and client trust; poorly executed sales pose the real threat.

END. has significantly shortened markdown cycles, supported by a higher share of exclusive and continuative products that reduce reliance on clearance. The result has been greater resilience, including full-price uplifts during sale periods, as disciplined transitions signal strength rather than distress.

Private labels were positioned as strategic complements, not competitors, designed to fill category gaps, address unmet demand, and expand choice where partner brands are not active.

TECHNOLOGY AND AI: SUPPORTING JUDGMENT

AI was positioned as an operational accelerator, not a strategic replacement. END deploys AI across merchandising, search, content, and design to improve speed and efficiency, while keeping human judgment central; select initiatives have already delivered high double- and even triple-digit growth.

Chalhoub reinforced that in relationship-driven markets, technology must enhance and never replace the human connection.

THE CEO VIEW: SCALE WITH DISCIPLINE

The future of multibrand retail will be defined by cultural authority and operational discipline. Scale alone is insufficient; it must be grounded in local intelligence and sharp execution. The advantage lies in editing with conviction, managing risk with rigor, and deploying technology to strengthen—not replace—human relationships. In a fragmented market, platforms that balance curation, profitability, and connection will shape the next phase of influence.

The biggest mistake would be to think that what works globally automatically works in the GCC region.

Isabell Hendrichs

Speakers: **Valentin von Arnim**, General Manager, IRIS VON ARNIM / **Leopoldo Cavalli**, CEO & Co-Founder, Visionnaire

Moderator: **Vana Antonopoulou**, Director of Content & Community, RLC Global Forum

What Sustains Luxury Over Time

Enduring luxury brands sustain relevance, trust, and desirability across generations. Through the perspectives of family-owned and design-led businesses, the discussion examined heritage as a living system, the primacy of product and craftsmanship, and the strategic choices that allow luxury to endure in a rapidly shifting global and cultural landscape.

HERITAGE AS A LIVING MINDSET

The conversation opened with a redefinition of heritage, positioning it not as nostalgia or archive, but as a mindset actively shaping daily decision-making. Valentin von Arnim described how Iris von Arnim's 50-year history remains anchored in the founder's ongoing involvement, particularly in product design and quality control. Heritage, in this context, was framed as intuitive continuity, where values established decades ago continue to guide creative expression and operational discipline.

LUXURY VALUES AND THE NEXT GENERATION

Von Arnim argued that core luxury values have not fundamentally changed, but have been reframed. Sustainability, for example, was described not as consumption reduction, but as buying better: fewer items, owned longer, recombined and reused over time.

This philosophy aligns with younger consumers' growing emphasis on longevity, responsibility, and meaning. While hyper-luxury brands may not be immediate priorities at age 22, the aspiration to own exceptional, lasting pieces was described as a value that emerges over time rather than disappearing altogether.

EXPANDING LUXURY BEYOND OBJECTS

Leopoldo Cavalli broadened the discussion by framing luxury as an enabler of quality of life rather than solely a category of objects. In the context of interior design, beauty and execution were described as central to human well-being, creativity, and social connection. Cavalli emphasized that living in beautiful spaces and surrounding oneself with well-executed design elevates daily life, influencing emotional and social outcomes.

Beyond aesthetics, he highlighted the increasing importance of sustainability metrics in interiors, including material emissions, durability, and long-term performance. These factors now play a role in how spaces, and even real estate, are evaluated and classified, reinforcing luxury's growing responsibility toward health, longevity, and environmental impact.

LONGEVITY OVER SCALE

Both speakers converged on the idea that scale is not the primary objective of enduring luxury brands. Von Arnim emphasized that family ownership provides the strategic freedom to prioritize long-term positioning over short-term growth targets. Success was framed not in annual percentage increases, but in where the brand aims to be in 10 or 15 years.

Manufacturing was cited as a critical constraint and strategic choice. Iris von Arnim's reliance on long-standing manufacturing partners, some relationships spanning more than 20 years, underscores the time required to achieve and maintain quality at the highest level. Selective distribution, including the ability to say no, was presented as a deliberate strategy to preserve brand integrity and long-term desirability.

TRUST BUILT THROUGH CONSISTENCY AND TRUTH

Trust emerged as a central theme in sustaining luxury over time. Von Arnim explained that trust is built through consistency, truthfulness, and the ability to deliver repeatedly on brand promises. Rather than retrofitting stories onto products, he emphasized the power of authentic narratives rooted in real history, real processes, and real values. This consistency creates multi-generational loyalty.

CRAFTSMANSHIP IN A CONSTRAINED WORLD

The discussion also highlighted the operational realities of sustaining luxury craftsmanship. Von Arnim noted the growing scarcity of highly skilled hand knitters capable of meeting the brand's standards, with production often requiring weeks for a single garment. Maintaining this level of craftsmanship necessitates long lead times, deep training, and a willingness to accept natural limits on volume.

Cavalli reinforced that a brand's "flavor," or distinctive creative identity, ultimately defines its longevity. Craft, material knowledge, and execution are inseparable from emotional connection, reinforcing why luxury cannot be industrialized without losing its essence.

THE CEO VIEW: LONGEVITY AS STRATEGY

Luxury endures through clarity of purpose, discipline in execution, and emotional resonance. Whether expressed through a cashmere sweater or a living space, sustained luxury depends on authenticity, patience, and respect for craft. Brands capable of resisting short-term pressure, investing in quality and trust, and remaining faithful to their founding values are best positioned to endure across generations.

Apart from beauty and excellence, the market is now looking for something more: how to improve quality of life.

Leopoldo Cavalli

Once a certain level of service is experienced, consumer expectations rise across the board.

Fares Akkad
Regional Director for MENA, Meta

The Gulf region is now the biggest promise in terms of growth possibilities for all of the brands. And surprisingly, not many brands, especially in Saudi, are present.

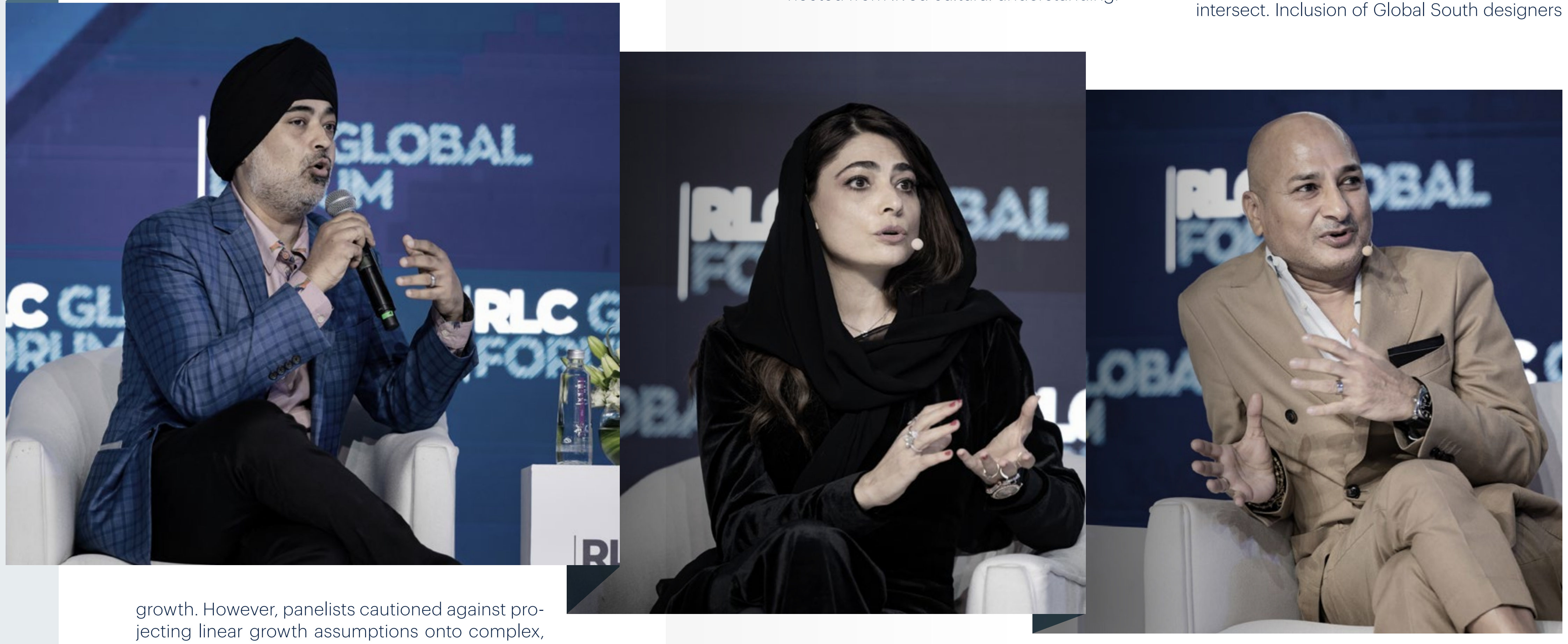
Burak Çakmak
CEO, Saudi Fashion Commission

Speakers: Honayda Serafi, Founder & Creative Director, HONAYDA / **Jaspreet Chandok**, Group Vice President, Reliance Brands Ltd & Head, Fashion Week India / **Rahul Prasad**, Managing Director (Asia Pacific, Middle East and India), Pike Preston Partners

Moderator: Sujata Assomull, Journalist & Author

The Global South's New Luxury Influence

Global luxury growth becomes more uneven, with attention shifting toward the Global South. Leaders discussed how markets such as Saudi Arabia and India are reshaping luxury through identity, craft, and consumer maturity, moving from being destinations for expansion to becoming drivers of relevance, innovation, and long-term value.



RISING EXPECTATIONS AND THE RISK OF OVER-PROJECTION

The discussion opened with a shared acknowledgment that global expectations for the Global South have intensified as China slows and some Western markets soften. India and the Gulf are increasingly viewed as the next engines of luxury growth. However, panelists cautioned against projecting linear growth assumptions onto complex, evolving markets.

While India is forecast to grow at approximately 10%, and Saudi Arabia's luxury market is expected to exceed USD 23 billion, speakers emphasized that numbers alone fail to capture market dynamics. Growth requires time, cultural understanding, and patient investment. Treating these markets as short-term substitutes for China risks misalignment between brand strategy and consumer reality.

DEFINING LUXURY THROUGH LOCAL CONTEXT

What constitutes luxury in India or Saudi Arabia does not always align with Western definitions. In India, categories often described globally as "accessible luxury" function as true luxury, both economically and culturally.

Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, luxury consumers are globally mobile and highly informed. Many purchase international brands while traveling, which raises the bar for what local retail must deliver.

CULTURAL RELEVANCE AND CREATIVE AUTHORITY

Consumers in the Global South increasingly expect brands to engage with local stories, habits, and aesthetics in meaningful ways. Surface-level localization, such as adapting silhouettes or introducing symbolic motifs, was described as insufficient when disconnected from lived cultural understanding.

Local designers were positioned not as complements to global brands, but as authoritative creative voices in their own right. International brands that collaborate authentically with local talent—rather than merely referencing local culture—are more likely to build long-term credibility and trust.

THE SHIFT IN POWER TOWARD HOMEGROWN BRANDS

The session highlighted a notable power shift: homegrown brands are no longer aspiring to validation through global luxury houses alone. Instead, international brands increasingly seek access to local creative insight, consumer intimacy, and cultural legitimacy.

This shift reflects a broader maturation of the ecosystem. Domestic consumers are prioritizing fit with lifestyle, emotional connection, and price-value alignment over logo-driven purchasing. As a result, local brands that understand daily rituals, social moments, and evolving aspirations are gaining share and shaping category growth.

DEPARTMENT STORES AND THE GLOBAL–LOCAL BALANCE

Department stores were discussed as important platforms where global and local narratives intersect. Inclusion of Global South designers in international department stores was framed as mutually reinforcing rather than symbolic. Local brands bring cultural depth, while global platforms offer scale and visibility.

However, panelists stressed that true brand value must exist independently of international validation. Long-term success depends on brand strength at home, with global presence serving as an amplifier rather than a foundation.

WOMEN AS ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CATALYSTS

In Saudi Arabia, women's increased workforce participation and financial independence are transforming purchasing behavior. Decision-making is more deliberate, value-driven, and investment-oriented, with quality, longevity, and relevance taking precedence over brand recognition alone.

In India, similar dynamics are unfolding, supported by rising double-income households and female leadership across creative and commercial sectors. These shifts are redefining luxury consumption as intentional and informed, rather than aspirational in the traditional sense.

FROM MANUFACTURING BASE TO CREATIVE POWERHOUSE

The session underscored a broader rebalancing of global luxury influence. The Global South is increasingly asserting itself as a source of creativity, craft, and original brand-building, rather than a manufacturing or consumption base alone.

Indian and Middle Eastern designers are gaining visibility on global stages, supported by renewed international interest in craftsmanship, storytelling, and authenticity.

THE CEO VIEW: POWER REBALANCED

The Global South is no longer peripheral to luxury's future. As consumer power, cultural confidence, and creative leadership converge, markets such as Saudi Arabia and India are redefining how luxury is created, communicated, and valued. Brands that approach these regions with humility, patience, and genuine collaboration will participate in the next chapter of global growth for the sector.

With China slowing, everybody's looking at India as the next big luxury market. That kind of puts pressure on brands when they come to India, expecting the same scale coming through quickly.

Jaspreet Chandok

Speakers: **Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Alasaker**, Chief Commercial Officer, Riyadh Airports Company / **Vijay Talwar**, Chief Commercial & Digital Officer, Avolta

Moderator: **Vana Antonopoulou**, Director of Content & Community, RLC Global Forum

Inside the Premium Traveler Economy: Power, Spend, and the New Luxury Battleground

Competition for the premium traveler is intensifying across the global travel ecosystem. No longer defined by ticket class alone, this segment sets the pace for service, loyalty, and spend. From Riyadh's airport evolution to digitally driven retail models, the discussion focused on building seamless, experience-led ecosystems.

THE PREMIUM TRAVELER AS A STRATEGIC CONSUMER SEGMENT

The session opened by reframing the premium traveler as more than a high-spending passenger. Premium travelers are defined by how they travel, stay, and spend across the full journey. Their expectations are shaped by luxury hospitality, first- and business-class travel, and digitally enabled convenience.

This traveler segment is increasingly influential, not only because of spend, but because it sets benchmarks for service, experience, and innovation. Airports, brands, and operators that succeed with premium travelers often raise standards across their entire customer base.

AIRPORTS AS THE FIRST AND LAST BRAND TOUCHPOINT

From the airport operator perspective, airports are no longer transitional spaces but critical extensions of destination identity. Riyadh's airport strategy was described as a long-term journey that began with the introduction of Terminal 5 in 2015, marking the first structured effort to elevate brand mix, retail concepts, and customer experience.

Premium airport experience depends on orchestration rather than isolated excellence. Customs, immigration, security, retail, food and beverage, and lounges must operate under a shared vision. Vision 2030 was cited as the catalyst that aligned stakeholders around a single objective: delivering a seamless passenger experience from curbside to boarding gate, and from arrival to departure.

EXPERIENCE AS THE DRIVER OF PREMIUM SPEND

For global travel retailer Avolta, premium engagement has shifted away from price points alone toward experience-led value creation. The company's portfolio spans duty free, luxury retail, convenience, and food and beverage, enabling multiple engagement moments across the traveler journey.

Millennials and Gen Z travelers represented less than 50% of airport traffic just a few years ago; within the next five years, they are expected to account for more than 70–75% of total volumes. Digitally native and experience-driven, they are less inclined toward traditional retail browsing and more responsive to interactive, content-led engagement.

In response, Avolta launched its digital-first loyalty platform, Club Avolta, structured around tiered access rather than transactional rewards. The focus is on experiences, events, and exclusive access that extend beyond the airport visit itself.

LOYALTY BEYOND THE AIRPORT VISIT

Travelers move constantly, and loyalty must travel with them. Club Avolta was designed to maintain engagement even when customers are not flying. In fact, users of Avolta's loyalty app spend an average of 9–10 minutes per day, across the full year, interacting with content, games, and brand experiences. This level of engagement fundamentally changes the economics of airport retail by sustaining relationships outside the terminal.

Entertainment was positioned as a strategic lever. Avolta has executed thousands of events globally, ranging from brand activations to seasonal entertainment, reinforcing the idea that emotional engagement, not dwell time alone, drives premium loyalty.

FOOD, WELLNESS, AND EXPERIENTIAL RETAIL

Food and beverage emerged as a critical premium differentiator, particularly in Riyadh. Airport data showed clear gaps in dining and experiential F&B, prompting partnerships to introduce globally recognized concepts, including Wolfgang Puck dining and elevated lounge experiences.

Luxury retail activation was also discussed through experiential formats. Examples included high-end perfumery concepts and quick in-store beauty services such as three-to-five-minute facial rituals, designed to align with the time-sensitive nature of air travel while delivering tangible value.

These formats demonstrate how premium experience can be delivered within tight operational constraints when designed around traveler behavior.

THE FRAGILITY OF THE PREMIUM JOURNEY

When asked about the biggest risks to premium experience, panelists converged on fragmentation. From the traveler's perspective, the airport is a single entity. In reality, it is a network of independent operators. Any breakdown—whether in temperature, queue management, or service consistency—erodes trust.

THE CEO VIEW: ENGINEERING VALUE

The premium traveler economy rewards precision over opulence. High-value passengers respond to journeys that feel intuitive, connected, and personally relevant at every step. The strategic imperative is disciplined alignment—across infrastructure, partners, and data—so that what appears seamless to the traveler is, behind the scenes, rigorously designed.

It is very difficult to offer a great experience in the city if that experience does not carry through to the airport.

Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Alasaker

My message to luxury brands is not to just rely on the super-rich, but to make sure they stay relevant to a broader consumer audience.

Luca Solca
Managing Director and Global Head of Luxury Goods, Bernstein

In the era of artificial intelligence, we need even more artisanal intelligence. AI can play a major role in supporting it through new tools. It is not replacing creativity, it is truly enhancing it. AI does not replace human creativity; it unlocks new tools to express it.

Emanuela Prandelli
PhD, LVMH Professor of Fashion and Luxury Management,
Bocconi University

The new fashion and luxury playbook

Fashion and luxury are balancing heritage and innovation, broadening relevance, strengthening cultural identity and reaffirming craftsmanship, creativity and long-term value in a more discerning global market.

My message to the luxury brands is not to just rely on the super-rich, but to make sure that they stay relevant to a broader consumer audience.

Luca Solca
Managing Director and Global Head of Luxury Goods, Bernstein

There is a generation that is questioning where true value is, and there is a duty on the big luxury houses to clearly explain and share that.

Fahed Ghanim
CEO, Majid Al Futtaim – Lifestyle

Historically in luxury, there was this kind of aspiration about waiting for the product and the scarcity. Today, it's much more democratic.

Marco Bizzari
Entrepreneur & Investor

You have to have a strong DNA. Many brands look the same today, but without a clear story and a strong identity that resonates with your target audience, no one will connect with you.

Princess Noura bint Faisal Al Saud
CEO, Jay3lle & Founder, Culture House

I believe that one of the most important lessons that designers from Saudi and the Gulf should learn is to be extremely proud of their culture, extremely proud of their roots and understand the value of their designs and the difference that they can add to the global market.

Honayda Serafi
Founder and Creative Director, HONAYDA

Fashion stays vital when there is a new proposition, when there is research and a proper mix between established brands and new designers.

Carlo Capasa
Chairman, Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana

We want to take prestige beauty, keep the craftsmanship and excellence, and make it more accessible, more authentic, and more relevant.

Umair Ansari
Senior VP & General Manager - Travel Retail EMEA and Americas, The Estée Lauder Companies

It's always more than a piece of clothing. It's about quality, it's about trust, it's about consistent values and not trying to be somebody else. It's about staying who you are.

Valentin von Arnim
General Manager, IRIS VON ARNIM

50% of the effectiveness of a social media campaign relies on the right creative, so brands and retailers really need to up their game on this side and make sure they create content that is native to the platform.

Anna Germanos
Group Director CPG, Retail, E-commerce & Luxury, Meta

We are not in the cross-border business. We are here to make sure that we have our value added to the overall economy. So, localization, for us, is the name of the game.

Mohamad ElAnsari
CEO, Trendyol Gulf

RLC FASHION SUMMIT

June 3-4, 2026
Four Seasons Hotel Milano

The Shape of Influence

In June, Milano hosts the 2026 RLC Fashion Summit, an invitation-only gathering of the most senior leaders in fashion, luxury, investment, and policy, at the Four Seasons Hotel Milano in the heart of the Quadrilatero della Moda.

The industry is in a harder moment. Growth is uneven. Capital is selective. Influence has moved toward geographies and platforms that are still writing their own rules. RLC puts the people most responsible for navigating this in the same room, and asks them to engage with four questions the industry cannot afford to get wrong: where growth is actually going, what desire means now, how luxury sustains its economics, and what AI does to all of it.

AI AND DATA: RE-INVENTING RETAIL

Across retail, AI is now shaping how decisions are taken and how commerce operates, moving from isolated use cases into the core of leadership, execution and competition. As organizations integrate AI into forecasting, merchandising, marketing, and operations, its impact extends far beyond productivity gains. Leadership teams are rethinking how decisions are made, how responsibilities are structured, and how performance is measured. At the same time, new technologies are transforming the mechanics of discovery, transactions, and customer interaction. The real challenge is no longer technological capability, but adoption: embedding intelligence into everyday operations and ensuring it strengthens strategy, judgment, and long-term competitiveness.

Speaker: **Charbel Sarkis**, Regional Director – MENA, Google

AI and the New Retail Leadership Agenda
The AI landscape

The session unfolded in two connected but distinct parts. Charbel Sarkis of Google first set the scene with a forward-looking perspective on how artificial intelligence is reshaping retail, particularly the shift from experimentation to real adoption. He then joined Michael Chalhoub, CEO of Chalhoub Group for a deeper conversation about what that shift means in practice: how AI moves from theory into strategy.

THE AI INFLECTION POINT: FROM IMAGINATION TO REALITY

Charbel Sarkis opened the session with both humor and urgency. Framing his personal New Year's resolution—training for a marathon with Usain Bolt—he demonstrated how artificial intelligence is already blurring the line between aspiration and execution. The example was playful, but the message was serious: AI is no longer a distant vision of the future. It is embedded in the present.

"Welcome to the future of shopping," he declared—before clarifying that this future is not hypothetical. "We are actually living it today."

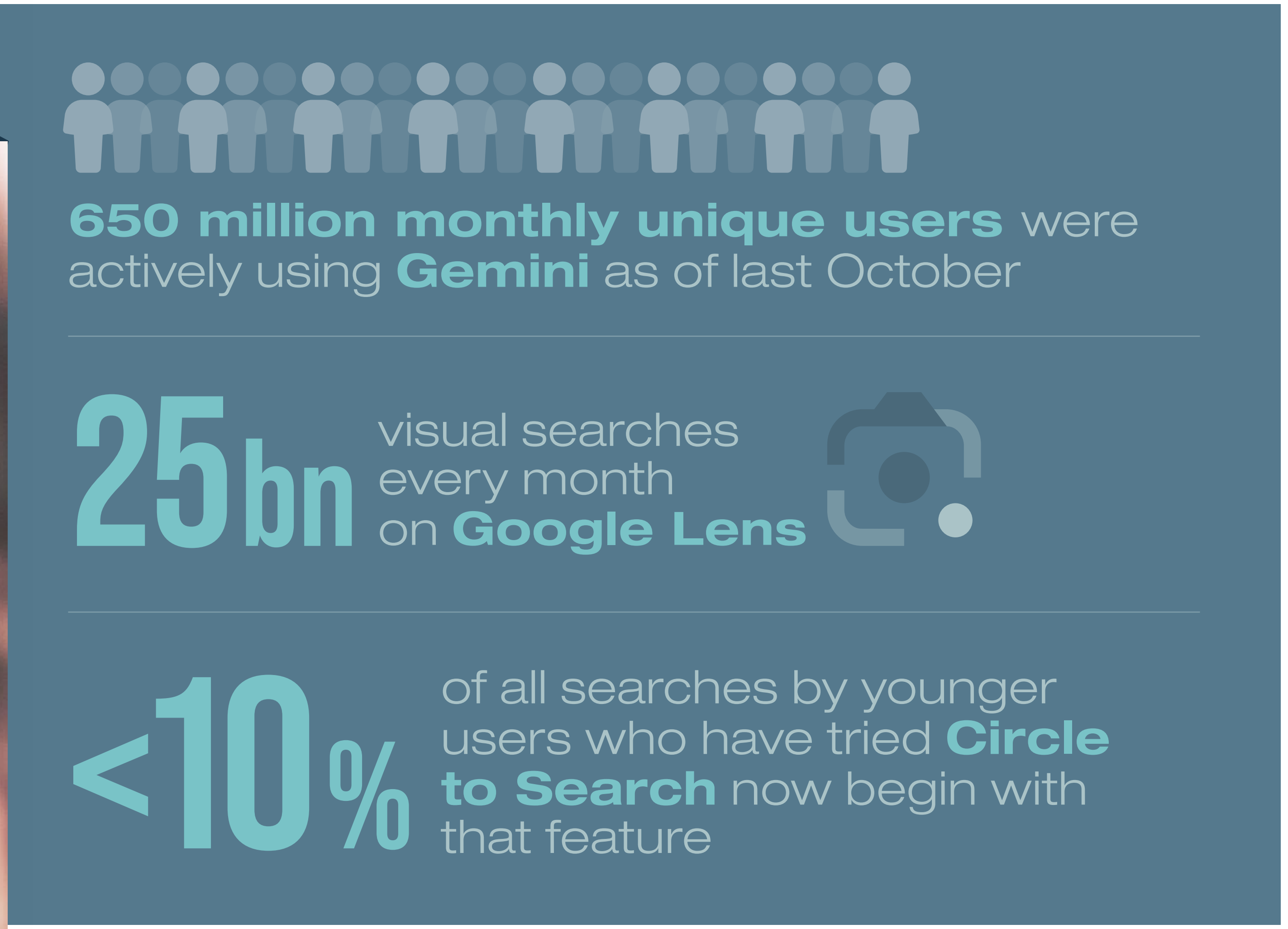
For Sarkis, this moment did not emerge overnight. It is the result of decades of investment in infrastructure, research, and product development at Google since its founding in 1998. He traced the arc from early AI applications such as spell check and translation to 2016, when Google declared itself an AI-first company. The tipping point for consumers, however, arrived in 2023, when large language models transformed how people interact with technology. Chatbots became conversational, intelligent, and accessible at scale. As of last October, Gemini surpassed 650 million monthly unique users, underscoring how rapidly AI tools have entered mainstream usage—including in the MENA region.

THREE FORCES DEFINING THE NEXT ERA OF AI

If 2023 marked the breakthrough year of large language models, Sarkis argued that the next phase of AI will be defined by three powerful forces reshaping commerce.

– First: Immersive visual creation

AI-generated imagery and video are no longer experimental novelties. With tools such as advanced image and video editing platforms, brands can now produce cinematic content without traditional production crews.



A campaign example created in partnership with Qatar Airways illustrated how entire scenes can be generated without physical filming. The implications for marketing, content creation, and storytelling are profound.

– Second: Personal intelligence

For 25 years, search was "amnesiac," as Sarkis described it—each query disconnected from personal context. That era is ending. With the introduction of personal intelligence, AI can connect across apps and, with user permission, reference relevant information to deliver tailored recommendations. Search is evolving from transactional lookup to contextual understanding. "Farewell to anonymous research and welcome personalized," he said, highlighting a shift that moves from generic results to deeply individualized journeys.

– Third: Agentic AI

The next frontier is action. Agentic AI anticipates needs, performs tedious research, checks inventory and pricing, and increasingly completes tasks with permission. It reduces friction across the entire path from discovery to decision. Rather than simply responding to queries, AI begins to assist proactively.

THE RISE OF THE SUPER-EMPOWERED SHOPPER

According to Sarkis, today's consumer is evolving into what he calls the "super-empowered shopper." This shopper expects more than a product list. They demand visually immersive experiences, conversational interfaces, personalization, and authenticity.

They do not want to search for "running shoes." They want a six-month marathon plan tailored to their lifestyle, budget, and preferences—with all required equipment integrated into one seamless recommendation.

Supporting this behavioral shift are significant usage trends. Google Lens now processes 25 billion visual searches every month, reflecting the rapid normalization of image-based discovery. Meanwhile, among younger users who have adopted Circle to Search, more than 10% of their searches now begin with that feature rather than a typed query, signaling a generational shift away from text-dominant interaction.

The mandate for retailers is clear: the bar has been raised. Consumers expect immediacy, relevance, and intelligence embedded into every interaction. AI is not an add-on layer; it is redefining how value is created.

Sarkis' message was both optimistic and direct. The future of commerce will not be shaped by those who wait for clarity. It will belong to those who build capabilities, experiment responsibly, and adapt quickly to a new standard of consumer expectation.

Speaker: **Michael Chalhoub**, CEO, Chalhoub Group
Interviewer: **Charbel Sarkis**, Regional Director – MENA, Google

AI and the New Retail Leadership Agenda

The executive conversation

If the first part defined the technological shift, the second tested its strategic reality. Moving from innovation to implementation, the dialogue between Charbel Sarkis and Michael Chalhoub examined what it takes to embed AI into the core of an organization without compromising identity, culture, or long-term ambition.

FROM TECHNOLOGY CONVERSATION TO EXECUTIVE ACTION

The second phase transitioned from technological framing to executive execution. In conversation with Charbel Sarkis, Michael Chalhoub provided a detailed view of how Chalhoub Group is embedding AI into its long-term strategy, while preserving the company's heritage and DNA.

Celebrating its 70th anniversary, Chalhoub Group finds itself at a pivotal moment, honoring its legacy while preparing for the next 70 years. Chalhoub described leadership today as the art of managing change without losing identity. The challenge is not simply adopting new tools but integrating them in ways that reinforce the group's cultural foundations.

The company's performance provides context for this ambition. Chalhoub Group has been growing at 8 percent year-on-year, navigating 2025 and 2026 with strong momentum. But growth, Chalhoub emphasized, is not driven by technology for its own sake. AI initiatives are deployed with a clear objective: enhancing customer experience, empowering employees, and strengthening relationships with communities and brand partners.

Central to this strategy is Vision 2033, the group's long-term roadmap. AI is one of three strategic enablers underpinning that vision, alongside people and operational excellence. Rather than treating AI as a functional tool, the group has embedded it into its ten-year growth pillars.

AI AS A BUSINESS MULTIPLIER

A flagship example is Layla, the group's AI-powered beauty coach integrated across its beauty platforms, including Faces.com. Layla provides personalized product recommendations and navigational guidance, helping customers solve specific beauty needs. The results are tangible: a 2.5x increase in conversion rates and an additional two minutes of average time spent on site. These metrics illustrate how AI can deepen engagement rather than dilute luxury experience.

Importantly, Layla was designed to feel empathetic and culturally relevant—countering the perception that AI creates cold, transactional interactions. Chalhoub stressed that the goal was not automation for efficiency alone, but personalization that feels human.

Beyond customer-facing applications, AI plays a structural role across three strategic pillars:

– Strengthening brand partnerships.
AI enhances market intelligence, demand prediction, and customer insight. Real-time data enables the group to collaborate more effectively with brand partners across the Middle East and Latin America.

– Building omnichannel ecosystems.
Chalhoub emphasized that luxury customers move fluidly between digital and physical environments. Platforms such as Faces, Level Shoes, Tanagra, and Tryano are designed to offer seamless experiences across both channels. AI supports this integration by aligning inventory, customer data, and personalized engagement across touchpoints.

– Expanding brand ownership
The group is exploring deeper brand ownership and potential acquisitions, including building proprietary brands like its existing portfolio. AI-driven intelligence informs these decisions by identifying market gaps and consumer appetite in real time.

DATA, PARTNERSHIP, AND THE LONG-TERM ADVANTAGE

Underpinning all of this is a robust data foundation built in partnership with Google. Chalhoub described the importance of establishing a single source of truth using tools like BigQuery and Looker. Clean data enables predictive demand planning and strategic clarity.

The partnership has also extended to employee enablement. Chalhoub Group developed its own internal AI platform, "Alia," a proprietary generative AI tool that keeps institutional knowledge in-house while accelerating productivity. Education preceded adoption: employees were trained before AI was deployed at scale, ensuring cultural readiness alongside technical capability.

The conversation also touched on demographics. The GCC, particularly Saudi Arabia, represents a young and digitally fluent consumer base. Younger customers are not only comfortable with AI—they expect it. Retailers must therefore integrate AI into everyday interactions, while maintaining accountability and brand trust.

In closing, Chalhoub reinforced that AI is not a siloed initiative. It requires partnership, shared intelligence, and ecosystem collaboration. Google has acted not merely as a technology vendor, but as a strategic growth enabler—supporting data architecture, education, and enterprise adoption.

THE CEO VIEW: TECHNOLOGY IN SERVICE OF IDENTITY

When thoughtfully integrated, AI can strengthen rather than dilute brand identity. For leaders, the mandate is no longer technological curiosity but disciplined integration. It demands digital fluency, cultural stewardship, and a long-term strategic horizon.

For us, it's been about managing change in ways that allow us to continue in the footsteps of what's been done so far, while adopting technological innovation and building the next 70 years ahead.

Michael Chalhoub

Speaker: Anna Germanos, Group Director CPG, Retail, E-commerce & Luxury, Meta

The Business of Conversation

Messaging has moved from a customer service tool to a commercial engine. As consumers increasingly live inside private digital channels, businesses are being required to operate in real time, at scale, and with relevance. Anna Germanos explored how conversation is becoming infrastructure.

FROM TRANSACTIONS TO SUSTAINED DIALOGUE

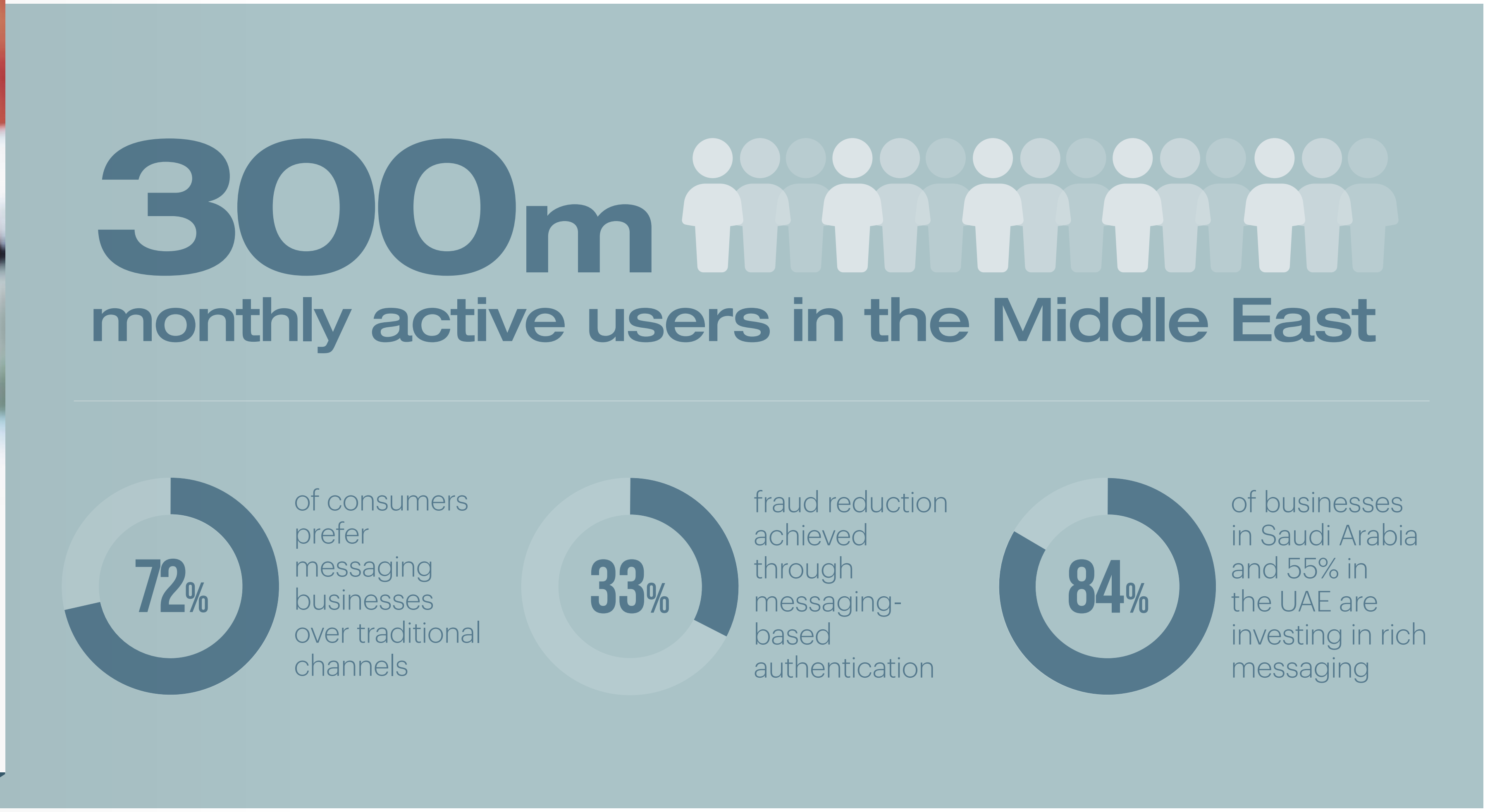
The session opened by reframing conversation as a leadership and commercial issue, not simply a customer service tool. In a market where experience increasingly defines brand value, the ability to move from one-off transactions to sustained dialogue was positioned as central to long-term growth. Messaging, by design, brings businesses into the most personal digital spaces of consumers, requiring a higher standard of relevance, trust, and responsiveness.

WhatsApp was highlighted as a uniquely powerful platform in this context. With approximately 300 million monthly active users across the region and research indicating that consumers in the Middle East check the app around 400 times per day, messaging has become the most persistent digital touchpoint in consumers' daily lives.

CONSUMER PREFERENCE DRIVING THE SHIFT TO MESSAGING

Data shared made clear that consumer behavior is already ahead of many organizations. According to research, 72% of consumers prefer to communicate with businesses through messaging rather than traditional channels such as calls or emails. This preference is reshaping expectations around speed, accessibility, and personalization.

For businesses, this creates both opportunity and responsibility. Entering a conversational space requires sensitivity to context and consent, but when executed well, it enables real-time, two-way engagement that feels natural to consumers and commercially effective for brands.



BUSINESS MESSAGING S REVENUE AND PERFORMANCE DRIVER

The session emphasized that messaging is a measurable growth lever. Marketing use cases on WhatsApp were described as delivering the highest return on ad spend (ROAS) compared to other digital channels, driven by personalization, immediacy, and reduced friction between discovery and conversion.

Beyond marketing performance, messaging was shown to positively impact core business KPIs, including customer satisfaction and retention. Personalized outreach, proactive notifications, and real-time responses help reinforce trust and reduce churn, positioning messaging as a driver of both short-term returns and long-term brand equity.

OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY THROUGH CONVERSATIONAL AUTOMATION

By automating 40–50% of routine customer queries through messaging and routing only complex issues to human agents, businesses are achieving meaningful cost reductions while improving response times.

Concrete examples were shared from e-commerce logistics, particularly in cash-on-delivery markets such as Saudi Arabia. Proactive WhatsApp notifications sent shortly before delivery confirming timing, payment amounts, and offering QR-based digital payment options have reduced delivery delays, improved cash readiness, and lowered logistics costs. Each avoided minute of delivery friction was described as a direct financial saving.

EXTENDING CONVERSATION ACROSS THE VALUE CHAIN

The session outlined three primary pillars of business messaging: marketing, utility, and authentication. Marketing journeys include acquisition, re-engagement, and promotional messaging linked to CRM data. Utility journeys span order management, payment reminders, fraud alerts, appointment notifications, and service updates. Authentication journeys, particularly one-time passwords, were shown to deliver both performance and security benefits.

Notably, authentication via messaging was cited as reducing fraud rates by 33% compared to traditional channels, while also achieving higher read and conversion rates.

THE CEO VIEW: CONVERSATION AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Conversational models require structural change, not tactical deployment. Success depends on integrated data, cross-functional alignment, and rigorous measurement. Many organizations still operate messaging in silos; leadership must unify IT, CRM, marketing, and operations around measurable return.

Conversation is now a core competitive capability.

Speakers: **Paul Morris**, Chief Customer & Technology Officer, Alshaya Group / **Nicole Nitschke**, Managing Director, Faces / **Jacqueline Elboghdadi**, Chief Marketing Officer, ADNOC Distribution / **Sargun Bawa**, Executive Vice President, Head of Consumer, Tamara

Moderator: **Maria Gedeon**, CEO, Gedeon Mohr & Partners

How AI is Rewiring Retail Organizations

AI is moving beyond pilots and proofs of concept into the structural core of retail organizations. From governance and operating models to speed, talent, and customer strategy, and is reshaping how decisions are made and value is created.

FROM TECHNOLOGY FUNCTION TO ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITY

Paul Morris shared how Alshaya Group has brought customer and technology under a single leadership structure, signaling a deeper operating shift. AI, he argued, is not about tools but about competitiveness, about how retailers reorganize decision-making, execution speed, and collaboration to adapt over a decade, not a quarter.

Productivity gains alone are insufficient. If operating margins remain unchanged, there is no AI strategy. The real advantage lies in redesigning how the business runs, embedding intelligence into the core of customer, commercial, and operational decisions.

CUSTOMER-CENTRIC AI AS A GROWTH ENGINE

One of the most concrete examples of AI-driven value came from beauty retail. Nicole Nitschke shared the launch of an AI-powered personal beauty assistant designed to replicate the tone, training, and cultural relevance of in-store beauty advisors.

Launched in October, the assistant has already generated over 100,000 customer interactions. Customers engaging with the tool spend more than twice as long on the platform and convert 2.6 times more frequently than those who do not. Beyond conversion, the AI creates a continuous feedback loop, generating insight into customer preferences, emerging trends, and assortment gaps that inform long-term merchandising and marketing strategy.

OPERATIONAL AI AND THE ECONOMICS OF EFFICIENCY

From a fuel and convenience retail perspective, AI was positioned as a tool to solve operational inefficiencies that directly affect customer experience. Jacqueline Elboghdadi shared how real-time AI-driven workforce planning enables teams to dynamically reallocate staff based on changing traffic patterns across locations.

This approach delivered meaningful operating expense efficiencies while reducing customer wait times, particularly during seasonal traffic surges. Similar AI models are now being used to cluster convenience store assortments, ensuring that different locations carry products aligned with local demand. The result is improved inventory efficiency, lower working capital, and higher customer satisfaction.

SPEED AS THE NEW COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

The session also highlighted how AI is collapsing traditional product development cycles. Sargun Bawa shared how AI is being used to compress the time from idea to live market test.

Through an internal hackathon, teams delivered a fully tested product feature—from concept to A/B testing—in eight hours, with approximately 90% of the code generated using AI tools. This experiment has become a benchmark for how the organization now thinks about speed, challenging legacy development cycles measured in weeks or months.

GOVERNANCE, SCALE AND ORGANIZATIONAL REDESIGN

AI adoption demands discipline and structural change. Leaders emphasized defining where AI creates measurable impact against core KPIs—from inventory allocation and purchase order reconciliation to exception management and decision escalation—reducing latency and improving execution across the value chain.

At the same time, organizational models are evolving. Functional silos are giving way to smaller, problem-focused teams enabled by AI. As agents take on executional tasks, spans of control widen, and roles shift toward problem ownership, adaptability, and the ability to translate business challenges into scalable solutions.

AI AS ENABLER OF HUMAN-CENTERED RETAIL

Despite concerns about automation, panelists stressed that AI's greatest value lies in empowering people, not replacing them. In beauty retail, AI is being deployed as a support tool for advisors, enhancing personalization and freeing teams to focus on human connection. Used with intent, AI removes complexity and strengthens relationships between brands, employees, and customers.

THE CEO VIEW: ADVANTAGE BY DESIGN

AI is rewiring retail organizations at every level, from strategy and structure to speed and skills. Competitive advantage will belong to those who adopt AI with purpose, discipline, and a clear focus on customer value. As tools become widely accessible, differentiation will come from operating models, governance, and the ability to translate intelligence into action at scale.

It's not about having the best AI tool. It's about which retailer will be the most competitive by adapting and adopting over a decade.

Paul Morris

AI deployment is a journey. It takes time. Sometimes it's painful. Sometimes it requires investment. In the end, it comes down to belief; you have to believe in it and keep moving forward.

Bandar Al Saidi
Chief Commercial Officer, Panda Retail Company

I am very excited to see the level of innovation and the new experiences that AI is bringing to consumer businesses and to society as a whole. Imagine that, with just a script or a simple prompt, you can create incredible content. The implications for the content creation industry are going to be extraordinary.

Charbel Sarkis
Regional Director – MENA, Google

Speaker: **Aref Yehia**, Head of Retail & E-Commerce Business Partnerships, TikTok

From AI Hype to AI Infrastructure: Why Adoption Beats Innovation

Aref Yehia challenged the prevailing AI narrative. Rather than chasing breakthrough innovation, he argued that real performance gains come from disciplined adoption: embedding AI into workflows, scaling it across operations, and treating it as infrastructure.

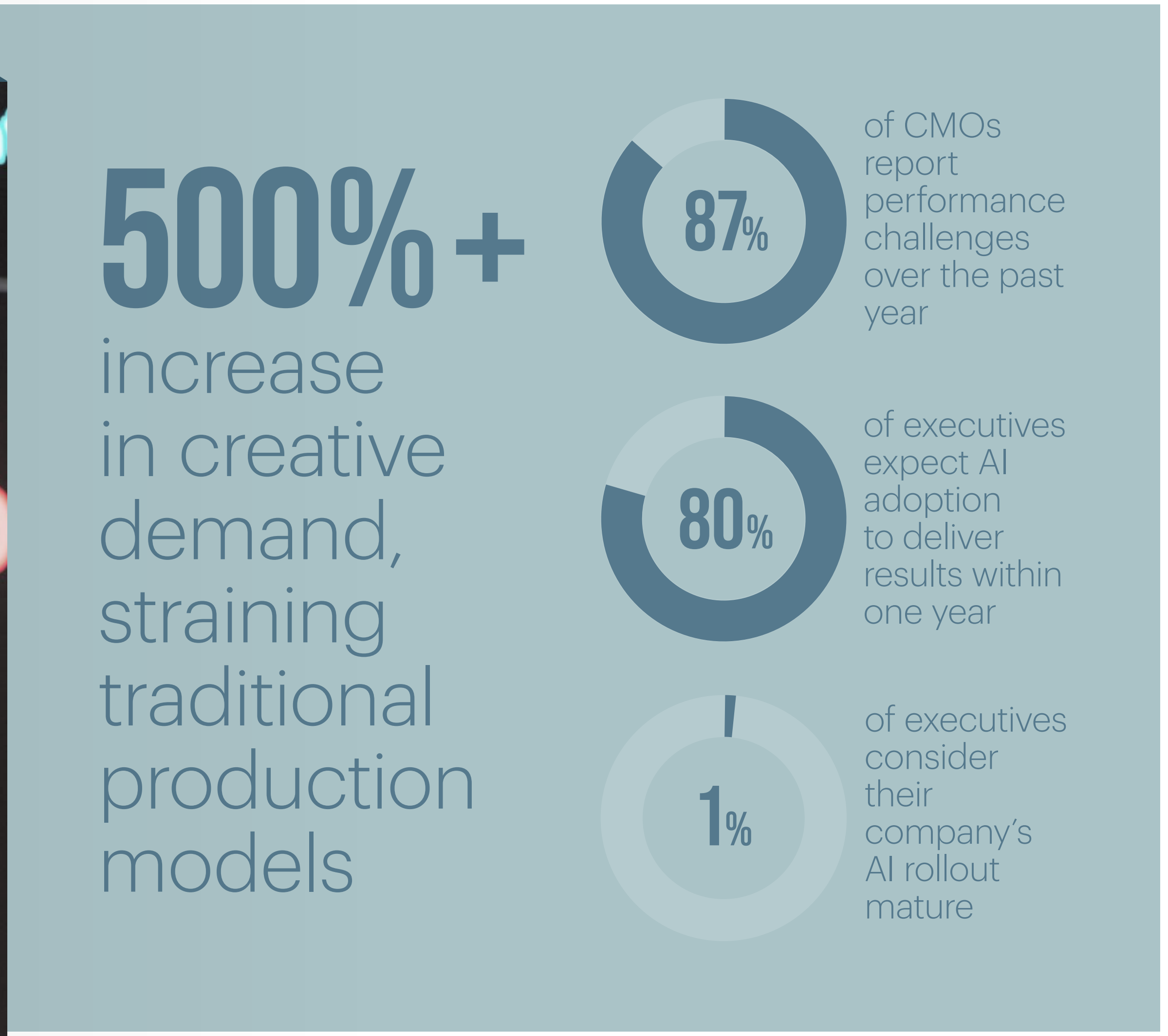
MARKETING VOLATILITY AND THE PRESSURE TO PERFORM

The session opened with a candid assessment of the current marketing environment. Performance volatility has become a defining feature of the landscape, with 87% of CMOs reporting performance challenges over the past year and 45% terminating campaigns early due to underperformance. At the same time, creative demand has increased dramatically, growing by 500%, placing unsustainable pressure on traditional, manual production models.

This combination of rising expectations and structural strain has created an urgent need for new operating models. The challenge facing leaders is no longer whether AI can help, but whether their organizations are equipped to absorb and operationalize it effectively.

THE J-CURVE OF AI ADOPTION

A central framework introduced during the session was the "J-curve" of technological adoption. When new technologies such as AI are introduced, performance often dips before improving. Teams require time to adapt workflows, build skills, and recalibrate expectations. This initial disruption phase is normal, but it often fuels frustration and skepticism.



Despite this reality, expectations remain compressed. 80% of executives believe AI adoption should deliver results within one year, even though only 1% of executives say their companies have achieved a mature AI rollout. This mismatch between human expectation and technological maturation creates two risk zones: early disappointment and, later, the risk of falling behind once AI capabilities accelerate beyond organizational readiness.

INFRASTRUCTURE OVER EXPERIMENTATION

AI delivers the greatest value when treated as infrastructure rather than as a standalone innovation. Infrastructure-led AI is built into existing systems, workflows, and decision processes, reducing friction and enabling consistent use. This approach prioritizes familiarity for teams while elevating outcomes behind the scenes.

Rather than introducing entirely new ways of working, AI becomes embedded into tools marketers already use, allowing organizations to scale output without increasing complexity.

SCALING CREATIVE PRODUCTION IN COMMERCE

Retail and commerce environments illustrate this challenge clearly. Catalogs often contain thousands—or in the case of marketplaces, millions—of SKUs. On video-first platforms, static images underperform, yet traditional video production cannot scale economically at this volume.

AI-enabled creative tools address this gap by converting existing catalog assets into native video formats at scale. Features such as image-to-video transformation allow brands to participate fully in video-driven environments without rebuilding production processes from scratch.

FROM TESTING TO BUSINESS AS USUAL

A key distinction highlighted was the shift from experimentation to business-as-usual adoption. One regional beauty e-commerce player integrated AI-driven creative tools into its standard operating model and achieved an 11x return on ad spend, using capabilities that had been available for over a year. The performance uplift came not from novelty, but from consistent, scaled use.

Similarly, fashion brands deploying digital avatars to showcase large product assortments reduced production constraints and improved efficiency. One campaign cited achieved a 50% reduction in cost per acquisition, driven by eliminating traditional content production costs while maintaining creative relevance.

AI SUPPORTING HUMAN JUDGMENT

Throughout the session, a clear boundary was drawn between automation and judgment. AI excels at low-empathy, repetitive tasks such as asset generation, localization, and content selection. Human creativity, cultural understanding, and strategic decision-making remain irreplaceable.

The most effective implementations augment human capability rather than attempt to replace it. AI handles scale and speed; humans focus on meaning, context, and growth decisions.

ADOPTION AS A COMPETITIVE IMPERATIVE

The session emphasized that the greatest risk facing organizations today is not failed experimentation, but delayed adoption. Many AI capabilities delivering measurable value have already been in market for 12 months or more. Organizations that postpone integration risk finding themselves in a catch-up phase, competing against peers who have already embedded AI into daily operations.

THE CEO VIEW: ADOPTION IS KEY

AI will not transform businesses through hype or isolated innovation. Sustainable impact comes from adoption, integration, and disciplined execution. Organizations that invest in AI as infrastructure are best positioned to convert technological potential into durable business performance.

Speakers: Mazen AlDarrab, Co-founder & CEO, Zid / **Majed M. AlTahan**, Co-founder & CEO, Danube Online & Founder & CEO, IACo / **Amit Keswani**, Chief Omnichannel and AI Officer, Chalhoub Group / **Mete Guney**, Market Development, Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa, Mastercard

Moderator: Simon Dyer, Regional VP Northern Europe & Middle East, Mirakl

Agentic Commerce and the Next Wave of E-Commerce

Commerce is moving into a new phase where autonomous agents guide how consumers search, choose, and buy. As these systems take a more active role in transactions, retailers and platforms must rethink how they show up and stay relevant in an increasingly automated e-commerce environment.

FROM SEARCH TO AGENT-LED DISCOVERY

Agentic commerce is no longer theoretical. Retailers are already seeing measurable traffic originating from large language models and AI assistants. In fact, 10–15% of merchant traffic is now coming from AI-driven referrals, with conversational platforms such as ChatGPT emerging as a meaningful discovery source in Saudi Arabia.

This shift fundamentally changes how products are found. Instead of consumers browsing or searching, intelligent agents increasingly surface curated options based on intent, criteria, and context.

TRUST AS THE CORE CURRENCY OF AGENTIC COMMERCE

As agents move from discovery to transaction, trust becomes the defining enabler. From a payments perspective, the discussion emphasized that the most valuable currency in this ecosystem is trust. Without it, agent-initiated transactions cannot scale.

Three foundational requirements were highlighted. First, the need to authenticate agents to distinguish legitimate assistants from malicious bots. Second, the importance of shared standards to ensure consistent, reliable data exchange across merchants, platforms, and financial institutions. Third, the necessity of explicit consumer consent, particularly as agents act on behalf of users and may otherwise make unintended or incorrect decisions.

GEN Z AND THE ACCELERATION OF EXPECTATIONS

Younger consumers, particularly Gen Z in Saudi Arabia, are accelerating the adoption of agentic commerce behaviors. Gen Z expectations are reshaping operational models around speed, simplicity, and autonomy. Delivery windows once measured in 40–60 minutes are now expected to be 15–25 minutes, placing significant pressure on supply chains and fulfillment operations.

Equally important is the preference for frictionless digital interaction. Gen Z consumers increasingly expect to complete entire transactions within an app, without phone calls or human intervention. Their evolving language, habits, and expectations require retailers to engage directly with this generation to understand how commerce is being redefined at a behavioral level.

OMNICHANNEL COMMERCE IN AN AGENT-DRIVEN WORLD

For premium and luxury retailers, the rise of agentic commerce presents both opportunity and risk. The challenge lies in preserving brand equity, trust, and emotional connection.

Three pillars emerged as critical. The first is brand-owned conversational agents, designed to guide discovery and recommendations while reflecting brand values. The second is discoverability within LLMs, as search behavior shifts away from traditional engines toward conversational interfaces. The third is secure, authenticated checkout, ensuring that payments and identity verification keep pace with new buying behaviors.

The speed of change is notable. While digital commerce took nearly two decades to mature, panelists suggested the next transformation could unfold within 36 months, requiring retailers to act decisively.

OPERATIONAL READINESS AND ASSORTMENT VISIBILITY

Agentic commerce increases operational complexity even as it simplifies the consumer journey. For multi-brand retailers, AI agents compare assortments instantly, prioritizing availability, consistency, and data quality. Low fill rates, inaccurate descriptions, or weak performance against key KPIs directly affect whether products are surfaced by agents.

As a result, maintaining high availability, consistent performance, and well-structured product data is now essential not only for customers, but also for algorithmic visibility within agent ecosystems.

PARTNERSHIPS, PAYMENTS, AND THE RISK OF DISINTERMEDIATION

A recurring theme was the risk of disintermediation. Retailers that fail to prepare for agent-led commerce risk losing direct relationships with customers to intermediaries managing discovery, payments, and data. Payment providers and technology partners therefore play a critical role in enabling secure, scalable participation in this ecosystem.

Notably, the region has already seen the first live agentic commerce transactions executed at scale, signaling that adoption is accelerating.

THE CEO VIEW: A BRAND NEW COMMERCE

Agentic commerce is reshaping e-commerce into something broader and more integrated. Success will depend on trust, security, operational readiness, and conversational engagement. Retailers that adapt quickly, build the right partnerships, and remain close to evolving consumer behavior will be best positioned to capture value.

The most important currency in our ecosystem is not the US dollar, or any other currency. It is trust.

Mete Guney

Speaker: Marie El Hoyek, Partner, McKinsey & Company

From Disruption to Impact: How to Reap the Benefits of Gen AI

As generative AI shifts from experimentation to enterprise imperative, Marie El Hoyek challenged leaders to focus on impact over hype. In a region outpacing global AI adoption, the priority is translating GenAI into measurable value by redesigning operations, capabilities, and leadership at scale.

A REGION READY FOR IMPACT

Across the Middle East, AI adoption stands at approximately 75%, exceeding the global average of 65%. Of an estimated USD 185 billion in total AI-driven economic impact for the region, nearly USD 30 billion is expected to come specifically from generative AI.

Yet despite this momentum, more than 80% of companies remain stuck in experimentation mode. They are building pilots, proofs of concept, or isolated tools that fail to scale across functions or deliver sustained bottom-line impact.

WHY MOST AI INITIATIVES STALL

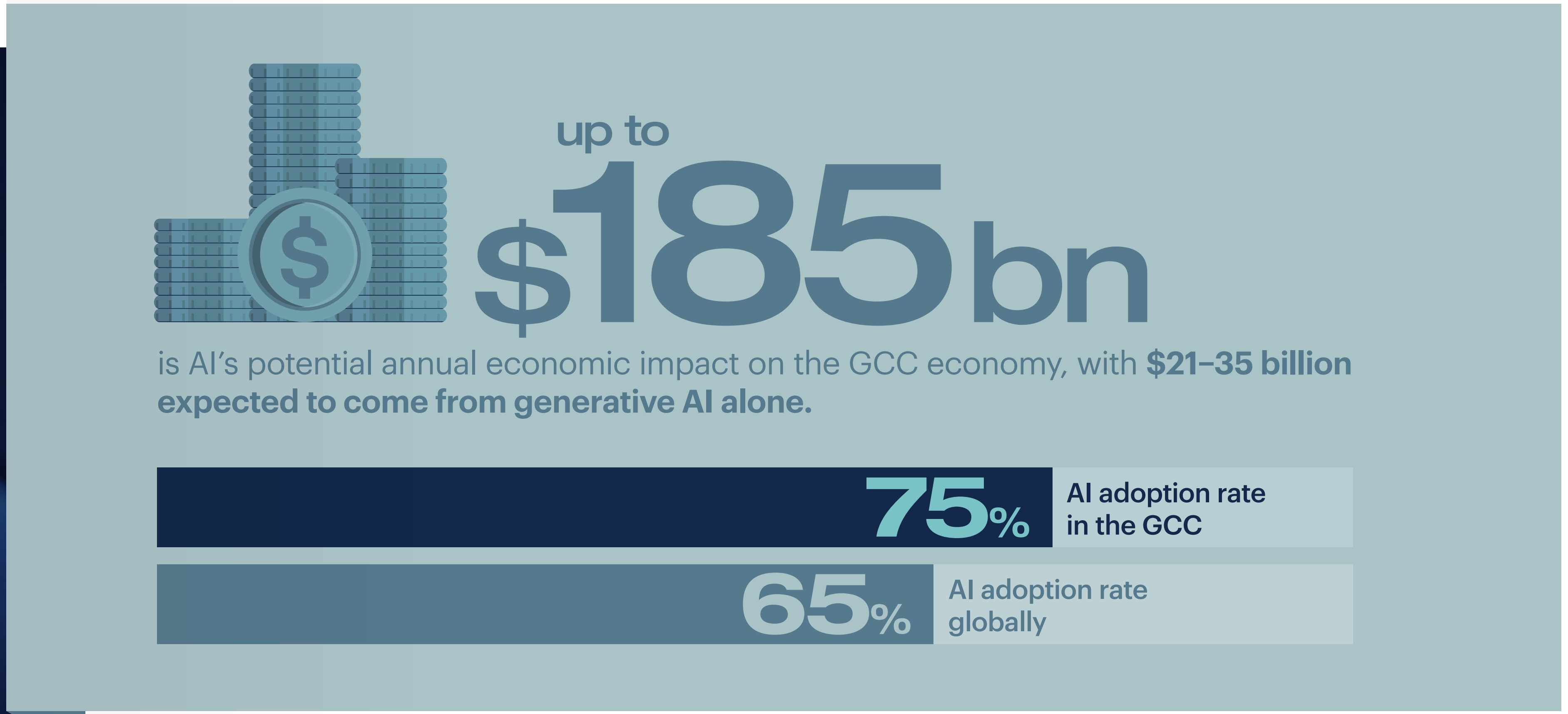
Many AI initiatives never move beyond pilots, remaining confined to small teams or narrow use cases. Others fail when transitioning from prototype to production, where reliability, scalability, and integration become far more complex.

In some cases, organizations successfully deploy a GenAI product but then stall as teams become consumed with maintenance rather than expansion. Finally, uncertainty around regulation, risk, and governance continues to slow decision-making, reinforcing a cautious, fragmented approach. Together, these issues prevent organizations from realizing AI's full economic and operational potential.

REWIRING THE ORGANIZATION TO CAPTURE VALUE

Capturing value from GenAI requires a fundamental rewiring of how organizations operate. At the strategic level, GenAI must be directly tied to business outcomes, with a clear roadmap defining what is built now, what comes next, and why it matters.

Crucially, leaders who capture impact do not think in terms of isolated applications. They prioritize one or two high-impact domains and redesign those domains end to end. Revenue growth, cost reduction, quality improvement, and cycle-time gains only materialize when entire processes are reimagined rather than partially automated.



TALENT, CAPABILITY, AND THE RISE OF TRANSLATORS

Organizations are increasingly internalizing advanced technology capabilities while reshaping broader workforce skills. The future workforce requires digital fluency across functions, not just within IT teams.

A critical role highlighted was that of the "translator," professionals who understand business value pools and can translate them into digital and GenAI applications. These profiles bridge the gap between strategic intent and technical execution. The shift underway favors deeper expertise over volume, with more experienced technologists shaping direction while foundational work is increasingly accelerated or outsourced.

PLATFORMS, DATA, AND DISTRIBUTED INNOVATION

Fragmented data environments limit scalability, while unified data platforms whether lakes, warehouses, or hybrid models enable reuse, speed, and consistency.

Leading organizations build shared data environments and modular capabilities that can be reused across domains. This approach allows teams to innovate faster without reinventing core components. By creating reusable building blocks, innovation becomes distributed, enabling non-technical teams to develop solutions while maintaining governance and coherence.

This modularity reduces cost, accelerates deployment, and ensures that innovation compounds over time rather than restarting with each new initiative.

LEADERSHIP AND ADOPTION AS STRATEGIC LEVERS

Technology alone does not drive transformation. Adoption, scaling, and sustained usage must be actively managed and measured. Leadership behavior plays a central role. When executives visibly use digital tools themselves, curiosity and adoption cascade throughout the organization. Highlighted with the most successful transformations are role-modeled from the top, with leaders embedding GenAI into their own workflows and decision-making processes. This signals seriousness of intent and accelerates cultural change.

PLAYING OFFENSE ON VALUE CREATION

Small, cautious pilots rarely produce meaningful returns. Instead, leaders should set bold objectives and design GenAI initiatives to directly influence financial performance.

This requires redesigning processes from first principles, asking how work would be structured if digital and human capabilities were fully integrated. Value capture must be measured rigorously, with clear accountability across business, technology, HR, and legal functions.

THE CEO VIEW: POTENTIAL TO PERFORMANCE

GenAI's promise lies in disciplined execution. Organizations that rewire operating models, strengthen data and talent foundations, and lead adoption from the top will accelerate impact. The opportunity is significant, but it rewards leaders who redesign how work gets done, transforming GenAI from experimentation into sustained performance.

Building long-term loyalty and emotional connection ultimately comes down to people. While many talk about AI and apps, our focus is on something more fundamental: opening the door for you and greeting you.

Shane Eldstrom
CEO, United Developers Qatar

Human behavior usually starts with very high expectations. But by the time the technology has evolved—often quite rapidly—organizations find themselves unable to catch up because they haven't prepared or properly set themselves up.

Aref Yehia
Head of Retail & E-Commerce Business Partnerships, TikTok

AI, technology and the human edge

Artificial intelligence is foundational, but advantage depends on embedding it with discipline and using it to strengthen human judgment, creativity and trust.

AI is now a pay-to-play capability for most retailers. If they are not using it, they are likely to become less competitive quite quickly.

Charles Allen
Senior Analyst, Retail, Bloomberg Intelligence

AI transformation often breaks down. Sometimes because retailers don't have the right tools or algorithms, but more often because those solutions are not properly embedded into the business.

Andy Veitch
Managing Director & Partner, BCG

It's not about having the best AI tool. It's about which retailer will be the most competitive by adapting and adopting over a decade.

Paul Morris
Chief Customer & Technology Officer, Alshaya Group

Today, AI is an enabler. AI is there to stand with humans within that customer experience, within that customer interaction and to make it stronger.

Michael Chalhoub
CEO, Chalhoub Group

If you use the tools made possible by AI, you can not only understand what the consumers are doing, but also why they are doing it.

Emanuela Prandelli
PhD, LVMH Professor, Bocconi University

Be very clear about what success means. If it doesn't work, move on to the next use case; there are plenty of ways to apply AI.

Tracey Griffin
CFO, Chalhoub Group

As AI-driven agents move from prototypes into real transactions, that shift represents core questions around trust, loyalty, and how cross-border flows will be managed.

Simon Dyer
Regional VP Northern Europe & Middle East, Mirakl

If we ensure that AI supports and empowers people, then I'm convinced beauty with AI becomes even more human, not less.

Nicole Nitschke
Managing Director, Faces

Ingie Chalhoub

Speaking from the media studio, Ingie Chalhoub, Founder and President of Etoile Group, offered her insights on luxury's transformation, the importance of cultural depth in the Middle East, and the expectations placed on female leaders.

On the evolution of luxury...

There is a big shift taking place in the luxury space. Luxury has shifted from visibility to accessibility and now to inspiration. It is about creating inspiration, delivering a seamless journey, and maintaining a true human emotional connection with your customers.

On succeeding in the Middle East...

It's important not to take things for granted. Even if you're strong globally. Locally, it is essential to understand the Oriental, Middle Eastern background, culture, and heritage.

On execution and brand transmission...

Brands come with their values, craftsmanship, and vision, and these must be conveyed seamlessly through flawless execution. Execution is about delivering the right message in the right way.

On women in leadership...

Women must be able to express their inner capabilities. Leadership as a woman is complex and comes with challenges, and it is often underestimated how much additional effort it requires—from choosing what to wear for each conference or event to managing personal responsibilities while balancing a professional career. For me, it is important that women leaders feel inspired.

CULTURAL POWER AND CONSUMER INFLUENCE

Influence today is earned across conversations, creators, algorithms, and cultural codes. Consumers are increasingly guided and selective, with trust forming around authenticity rather than brand authority. As digital platforms reshape how stories travel and communities form, the balance of influence between brands, creators, and audiences continues to shift. Beauty, fashion, and lifestyle sectors are increasingly shaped by cultural signals that move faster than traditional marketing cycles. At the same time, algorithmic discovery is transforming how products are seen, evaluated, and adopted. In this environment, commercial success depends less on controlling the message and more on understanding how culture, technology, and trust interact to shape consumer behavior.

Speakers: **Simone Dominici**, CEO, KIKO Milano / **Marco Parsiegla**, CEO, Amouage / **Umair Ansari**, Senior VP & General Manager - Travel Retail EMEA and Americas, The Estée Lauder Companies / **Rebecca Jobo**, President, Wellness Division, Alshaya Group

Moderator: **Guido Lubbers**, Middle East TLS Consumer Markets Leader, Indirect Tax Partner, PwC Middle East

Beauty, Scent, and the New Codes of Desire

Beauty and fragrance are evolving into powerful expressions of identity, wellness, and culture. In this session, global and regional leaders examined how desire is shifting beyond aesthetics toward authenticity, emotional depth and experience.

BEAUTY AS CULTURAL EXPRESSION

Simone Dominici, CEO of KIKO Milano, positioned beauty as a cultural language rather than a product category. He highlighted the brand's Ramadan collection as an example of blending Italian beauty craftsmanship with local Middle Eastern inspiration, demonstrating how global brands must translate quality into culturally meaningful narratives.

FROM GLOBAL BRANDS TO LOCALLY RESONANT COMMUNITIES

For fast-scaling global brands, the discussion highlighted the importance of blending global production excellence with local inspiration. One beauty brand shared how operating from Italy's "Beauty Valley" enables access to an ecosystem responsible for producing 55% of the world's makeup, while local insight shapes how collections resonate in different regions.

This approach has supported rapid international expansion. The Middle East was positioned as a catalyst market, with more than 100 stores now operating in the region and the brand achieving the number one makeup position locally. Brick-and-mortar retail remains central, supported by over 1,400 stores globally across 78 countries, and staffed by 9,000 beauty advisors who act as a constant feedback loop between consumers and product development.

SCENT, HERITAGE, AND EMOTIONAL DEPTH

Marco Parsiegla, CEO of Amouage, framed fragrance as culture in itself. For Amouage, authenticity is not constructed, it is rooted in Oman. "We exist because of Oman," he noted, emphasizing that the brand's storytelling is based on real places, ingredients, and heritage rather than marketing narratives.

In a category where approximately 6,000 new fragrances are expected to launch in a single year, Parsiegla argued that standing out requires emotional depth. Amouage measures success not by awareness, but by "excitement" defined as the gap between expectation and lived experience.

Retail, he stressed, is the most powerful content platform. "For us, the shop is the story," he said, describing stores as immersive cultural spaces rather than transactional outlets. This discipline has supported growth, with the house quadrupling in size over the past five years.

PERSONALIZATION AND THE END OF THE SIGNATURE SCENT

Umair Ansari, Senior VP & General Manager – Travel Retail EMEA and Americas at The Estée Lauder Companies, identified personalization and hyper-experimentation as major shifts reshaping fragrance. Consumers, he explained, are moving away from a single "signature scent" and instead curating fragrance wardrobes, layering scents to reflect mood, context, and identity. This behavior is redefining innovation cycles and assortment strategies.

To respond, Estée Lauder has launched initiatives such as its Fragrance Atelier in Paris, combining perfumery expertise with advanced technology to accelerate innovation. Ansari also highlighted AI integration across the organization, from analyzing large consumer datasets to launching tools like Jo Malone London's AI Scent Advisor — designed to translate natural language into tailored fragrance recommendations and bridge curiosity with confidence.

WELLNESS, THE FOURTH PILLAR OF BEAUTY

Rebecca Jobo, President of the Wellness Division at Alshaya Group, argued that beauty's culturally relevant moment today is wellness. Makeup and skincare, she noted, are no longer sufficient on their own. Wellness has emerged as a fourth pillar—alongside fragrance—blurring category lines. Consumers increasingly seek longevity, efficacy, and tangible benefits from the products they apply daily.

For Jobo, the challenge is not staying ahead of the consumer, but staying in step. She pointed to rapid trend cycles and highlighted industry investment in AI-driven innovation, including L'Oréal's recent $400 million AI lab initiative, as signals of where predictive beauty is headed.

THE CEO VIEW: DESIRE AS STRATEGY

Beauty's next growth chapter will be shaped less by product cadence and more by cultural intelligence, emotional depth, and experiential precision. As wellness, scent, and identity converge, retail becomes the decisive interface where emotion converts into measurable value. In an increasingly saturated category, strategic advantage lies in translating authenticity and heritage into scalable, modern relevance.

Innovation is not necessarily about staying one step ahead of the consumer, but about staying in step with your consumer.

Rebecca Jobo

Speakers: **Mina Al Sheikhly**, Founder & Creative Director, Mina Al Sheikhly
Yara Al Namlah, Creator & Founder, Moonglaze

Moderator: **Moon Baz**, Director, Global Partnerships; Africa, Middle East and Turkey, Meta

The Creator Economy and the Future of Influence

The creator economy is redefining the architecture of influence.
Speakers discussed how creators, platforms, and brands are shifting the model from reach to credibility, and what this means for brand partnerships, storytelling, and growth in an AI-driven landscape.

FROM REACH TO CREDIBILITY AS THE CURRENCY OF INFLUENCE

Influence today is less about momentary reach and more about sustained credibility built over time. Creators who have spent years cultivating trust with their audiences are increasingly guiding purchasing decisions, brand perception, and cultural relevance.

This evolution reflects broader changes in consumer behavior. Audiences are more discerning, less responsive to transactional endorsements, and increasingly focused on the values, consistency, and lived experience of the people they follow.

TRUST, TRANSPARENCY, AND COMMUNITY AS STRATEGIC ASSETS

Transparency—about background, perspective, and intent—was consistently highlighted as foundational to building authentic relationships with audiences. Creators emphasized that expertise without transparency lacks resonance, while lived experience becomes influential only when openly shared. Community building was positioned as the true engine of long-term influence.

SPEED, ALGORITHMS, AND THE CASE FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

The conversation addressed the tension between the internet's demand for speed and the slower process required to build trust. While platforms reward frequent posting and rapid content cycles, creators argued that speed should be understood as consistency rather than virality.

Chasing trends and views may generate short-term spikes in visibility, but it rarely translates into lasting influence. Sustainable growth, by contrast, comes from clarity of purpose, consistency of voice, and alignment with audience expectations.

RETHINKING BRAND–CREATOR COLLABORATION MODELS

Brand collaboration models are undergoing a structural shift. One-off, transactional campaigns are increasingly seen as less effective, both for creators and brands. Instead, long-term partnerships and ambassadorships are emerging as the preferred model.

These relationships allow creators to integrate brands naturally into their content, strengthening authenticity and recall. From a brand perspective, selecting creators is based on alignment, community trust, and content relevance, rather than follower counts alone. Brands were encouraged to evaluate engagement quality, comment authenticity, and narrative fit to ensure meaningful impact.

CREATIVE FREEDOM AS A PERFORMANCE DRIVER

Creative autonomy was highlighted as a decisive factor in campaign effectiveness. Rigid scripts and overly prescriptive brand requirements often undermine performance by disconnecting content from the creator's established voice and audience expectations.

Allowing creators to interpret brand messages through their own style, tone, and storytelling approach enables content to resonate more deeply. When creators genuinely use and believe in a product, the relationship evolves into a lifestyle association, strengthening both trust and conversion over time.

AI, THE GREAT ENABLER?

Artificial intelligence was featured as a tool reshaping content production, but not the essence of influence itself. AI is increasingly embedded in editing, translation, scripting, and content optimization, helping creators operate more efficiently and elevate production quality.

However, the discussion was clear that AI does not replace human creativity, cultural context, or emotional nuance. Authenticity, taste, tone of voice, and lived experience remain distinctly human attributes.

CULTURAL CONTEXT AND LOCAL RELEVANCE

The importance of cultural understanding was reinforced throughout the session. While AI can enhance efficiency, it lacks the contextual awareness required to navigate local sensibilities, language nuance, and regional identity. Creators' ability to reflect their environment, values, and lived realities continues to be central to their influence, particularly in culturally rich and diverse markets.

ADVICE FOR CREATORS AND BRANDS

For creators, the guidance was clear: prioritize trust, nurture community, and remain consistent in values and voice. Audiences reward authenticity and loyalty over time, creating resilience against platform volatility.

For brands, the message centered on belief and partnership. Trust creators to do what they do best. Clear objectives matter, but flexibility and respect for creative expertise are essential to unlocking impact.

THE CEO VIEW: BUILDING TRUST, BUILDING STRENGTH

Influence is no longer rented through reach but built through credibility, consistency, and trust. As AI accelerates content distribution, it amplifies voices that audiences already believe in rather than creating influence on its own. Long-term relevance will be defined by authenticity, alignment, and the strength of human connection in an increasingly automated world.

It's all about the value, the quality, and the credibility a content creator brings when engaging with their followers.

Mina Al Sheikhly

Speakers: **Gonzalo Brujó**, President & CEO, Interbrand / **Nouran Ghannam**, CEO, Stllr Network

Moderator: **Maria Gedeon**, CEO, Gedeon Mohr & Partners

The Algorithmic Consumer and the New Balance of Influence

In the AI era, influence is becoming less visible and more contested. What once sat clearly with brands, media, or cultural gatekeepers is now distributed across platforms, creators, algorithms, and intelligent systems. The implications extend directly to brand relevance, pricing power, and long-term strategic advantage.

FROM BRAND LOYALTY TO ALGORITHMIC MEDIATION

The discussion opened with a shared recognition that consumer behavior has become faster, less loyal, and increasingly mediated by algorithms. As AI tools integrate more deeply into commerce ecosystems, from search to transaction, the path between brand and consumer is no longer direct. Gonzalo Brujó highlighted that consumers are switching brands more rapidly than ever, and that AI is accelerating this behavior by compressing decision cycles and reshaping discovery.

This shift places pressure on brands to compete not only for consumer attention, but also for algorithmic visibility.

CREATORS, DIGITAL TWINS, AND THE TRUST EQUATION

The panel explored the evolving role of creators and influencers in a landscape shaped by synthetic content, AI-generated personas, and digital twins. Nouran Ghannam emphasized that in markets such as Saudi Arabia, authenticity remains a critical trust anchor. While AI twins and agents offer efficiency and scale, they should not replace the initial human connection between brand and consumer.

AI is best deployed to support discovery, answer questions, and scale content, while real creators and live interactions preserve credibility and emotional resonance. Live streaming, in particular, was highlighted as a powerful counterbalance to fully synthetic engagement, reinforcing trust through real-time human presence.

SEARCH, DISCOVERY, AND THE BATTLE FOR RELEVANCE

As discovery shifts from traditional search engines to AI-powered tools, brands face a new challenge: ranking within algorithmic environments. Ghannam noted that while Google remains dominant in traditional search, AI-driven platforms now account for a significant share of discovery behavior. This requires brands to rethink SEO strategies, ensuring visibility not only in classic search results but also within AI recommendation systems.

Brands must continuously adapt to cultural moments, local contexts, and fast-moving digital conversations. Agility, responsiveness, and cultural fluency were identified as critical capabilities in maintaining algorithmic and consumer relevance simultaneously.

BRAND BUILDING IN AN AGE OF DATA AND AGENTS

Brujó emphasized that while performance marketing and AI-driven optimization deliver short-term gains, long-term brand equity remains decisive. Drawing on insights from the Interbrand Best Global Brands Index, he noted that brands with consistent positioning, clear purpose, and disciplined storytelling outperform those that rely on constant reinvention.

Examples such as Hermès and Gucci illustrated how strategic consistency sustains brand strength, while excessive change can dilute narrative coherence.

PRICING POWER AND THE RISK OF COMMODITIZATION

The session addressed the growing risk of product commoditization as AI tools present consumers with functionally similar options across multiple brands. Brujó argued that pricing power cannot be sustained through product features alone. Instead, it depends on a clearly articulated ambition, purpose, and trajectory that inform business, brand, retail, and AI strategies in parallel.

He outlined five imperatives for brand resilience: clear identification of brand assets, disciplined performance management through data, investment in ambassadors and experience, ecosystem alignment across partners and platforms, and visible acts of leadership grounded in transparency and societal contribution. Together, these elements support differentiation beyond price in an increasingly comparable marketplace.

AUTHENTICITY AT SCALE: BLENDING HUMAN AND MACHINE

Nouran Ghannam shared a practical model for balancing authenticity with scalability, starting with human-led content as the foundation and using AI for post-production, variation, and amplification. This approach allows brands to remain culturally relevant and always-on without sacrificing credibility.

She emphasized that standout brands are active listeners, attuned to daily conversations, emerging audio and cultural trends, and local moments. AI enables rapid execution, but relevance is driven by human insight into what people care about and share in real time.

THE CEO VIEW: AUTHENTICITY VS AUTOMATION

The fundamentals of brand building have become more important, not less, in the age of AI. Purpose, authenticity, and experience remain decisive, even as technology reshapes how influence is distributed. Brands that win will be those that invest in AI as a capability; that remain agile without losing coherence; and that understand influence as a system spanning consumers, creators, data, and agents.

> You need to combine short-term and long-term strategies in parallel. You cannot throw everything at AI, digital, and performance without thinking about long-term brand building.
>
> **Gonzalo Brujó**

Speakers: **Muzzammil Ahussain**, CEO, Almosafer / **Loay Sultan**, Board Member, ARA - Jeddah Chamber / **Muin Serhan**, CEO, Amsa Hospitality

Moderator: **Muwaffaq M Jamal**, Managing Director, Sudasia Consultancy

The New Pilgrim Consumer

As Hajj and Umrah volumes accelerate toward Vision 2030 targets, the pilgrim is emerging as one of the world's most resilient and fast-evolving consumer segments. The discussion highlighted how scale, digital adoption, and rising service expectations are reshaping religious travel into an integrated ecosystem opportunity spanning hospitality, retail, transport, and mixed-use development.

A STRUCTURALLY RESILIENT CONSUMER BASE

The pilgrim consumer is one of the most structurally resilient customer segments in the world. Demand is guaranteed by faith, with Hajj and Umrah occurring every year regardless of macroeconomic conditions. With a global Muslim population of approximately two billion, every individual is religiously obligated to perform Hajj at least once, creating a uniquely durable demand base.

This structural resilience is now being amplified by scale. In 2024, Saudi Arabia welcomed 18 million Umrah visitors from outside the Kingdom, in addition to 10 million domestic pilgrims, underscoring the speed at which volumes are expanding. Vision 2030 targets 30 million Umrah visitors by 2030, a figure the panel suggested may be exceeded ahead of schedule.

FROM GROUP PILGRIMS TO INDIVIDUALIZED JOURNEYS

A defining shift discussed was the move away from standardized group travel toward individualized and family-based journeys. Pilgrims are increasingly traveling as couples, families, or small groups of friends, enabled by digital booking platforms, simplified visa processes, and improved transport infrastructure such as the Haramain High Speed Rail.

This shift has profound implications for operators. The traditional "one-size-fits-all" pilgrimage package is losing relevance. Pilgrims now expect customizable itineraries, choice across accommodation tiers, and the ability to curate their experience across religious, cultural, and leisure dimensions.

RISING EXPECTATIONS AND THE REDEFINITION OF HOSPITALITY

The panel emphasized that the modern pilgrim's expectations now extend well beyond accommodation. Pilgrims increasingly seek integrated experiences encompassing food and beverage, retail, transportation, and enrichment activities alongside religious rituals.

Government-led reforms are reinforcing this shift. Hotel classification standards are becoming more stringent, inspections more frequent, and service quality benchmarks higher. Operators noted that average room rates near the Haram have historically remained low—sometimes below SAR 50 per night—a dynamic now under pressure as authorities push for higher quality, better-trained staff, and globally competitive service standards.

Talent dynamics are already responding. Where Mecca and Medina were once overlooked as hospitality destinations for top-tier professionals, chefs and service leaders with international experience are now relocating to the holy cities, reflecting the elevation of standards and ambition across the sector.

RETAIL POTENTIAL HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Retail emerged as one of the most underappreciated opportunities within the pilgrim economy. A persistent misconception is that pilgrims lack discretionary spending power. The panel challenged this directly, citing empirical evidence from on-the-ground performance.

One example highlighted was the Rolex store at Abraj Al-Bait, described as one of the highest-performing Rolex locations globally, driven by sheer footfall rather than brand novelty. Even if 1% of visitors engage in luxury retail, the absolute volume translates into significant commercial impact.

Beyond luxury, gifting remains deeply embedded in pilgrimage culture. Pilgrims almost universally return home with gifts, not as souvenirs, but as cultural and religious tokens. This behavior creates scalable demand across multiple price tiers, from premium goods to everyday consumables, provided assortment, availability, and quality are aligned.

INTEGRATED ECOSYSTEMS OVER FRAGMENTED DEVELOPMENT

A recurring theme was the need for collaboration across sectors. Retail performance in Mecca and Medina cannot be optimized in isolation. Travel providers, hotel operators, developers, logistics players, and retailers must operate as a coordinated ecosystem to unlock full value.

Mixed-use destinations such as Masar were cited as future-defining models, capable of translating pilgrim needs into integrated environments combining accommodation, retail, entertainment, and services. As pilgrim itineraries become more complex and longer in duration, such destinations can capture increased dwell time and spend.

THE CEO VIEW: TECHNOLOGY AND PREDICTIVE ALIGNMENT

Technology and AI are emerging as practical enablers of a more coordinated pilgrim ecosystem, anticipating flows, managing capacity, and aligning supply with demand. As expectations rise and visitor profiles evolve, operators and investors must integrate hospitality, retail, transport, and digital infrastructure. In Mecca and Medina, growth will come from execution, converting assured demand into sustained value.

The customer needs more than accommodation; they seek entertainment, transportation, retail, food and beverage, and a fully integrated experience.

Muin Serhan

There's a lot of fatigue among Saudi consumers and tourists coming to Saudi Arabia from seeing the exact same repetitive brands in the market. They want novelty, they want uniqueness, they want fresh ideas, fresh IP, fresh concepts.

Bruno Wehbe
President - Flagship Assets and New Ventures, Cenomi Centers

We want to take prestige beauty, keep the craftsmanship and excellence, and make it more accessible, more authentic, and more relevant.

Umair Ansari
Senior VP & General Manager - Travel Retail EMEA and Americas,
The Estée Lauder Companies

Saud Alsulaiman, CEO of Alsulaiman Group, reflects on the evolution of Saudi retail, the rise of a more demanding consumer and the structural priorities required to strengthen the Kingdom's global competitiveness.

The biggest change in Saudi retail has been the clear shift in consumer expectations and behavior. **Shoppers are far more informed and selective, shaped by digital adoption and global exposure**. Loyalty is no longer assumed—it is earned through differentiated products, compelling value for money, and an outstanding overall experience.

Saudi retail has moved from being product-and availability-led to experience-driven, where speed, trust, and end-to-end excellence determine success.

Our decisions are guided by a deep understanding of market trends and evolving consumer needs, shaping our propositions to meet demand while staying ahead of the competitive curve. **In a highly dynamic and fast-evolving market, agility and the ability to adapt quickly are critical to capturing the right opportunities at the right time.**

To remain globally competitive, **Saudi retail must relentlessly elevate the end-to-end customer experience** while strengthening the ecosystem that enables it. That means building seamless, tech-enabled journeys that integrate personalization, speed, reliable fulfillment and embedded financial solutions, while structurally reducing operating costs across supply chains, rent and labor to enhance resilience and reinvestment capacity, particularly for SMEs.

The CEO view

Global retail competitiveness will be defined by ecosystem strength, operational efficiency and seamless, tech-enabled journeys at scale.

SAUDI ARABIA: A MARKET IN MOTION

Saudi Arabia's market is entering a decisive phase, defined not just by growth, but by competitiveness, localization, and ecosystem building. From national champions to SME platforms, the question is who can build and compete at scale. As Vision 2030 accelerates economic transformation, retail is emerging as a central driver of job creation, entrepreneurship, and domestic economic development. Policymakers, investors, and operators are working to strengthen productivity, logistics, and innovation while enabling new generations of local businesses to grow. Major developments and new commercial platforms are reshaping how consumers engage with brands. Which brands can combine local strength with global competitiveness?

Speakers: Saud Alsulaiman, CEO, Alsulaiman Group / **Fares Akkad**, Regional Director for MENA, Meta / **Dr. Martyn Davies**, Head of City Excellence & Retail Sector Leader, The Royal Commission for Riyadh City (RCRC) / **Farah Ismail**, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Economy and Planning, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Moderator: Norma Taki, Partner, PwC Middle East

Making Saudi Retail Competitive

Saudi retail is moving into a performance-driven era. With consumer demand firmly established, the focus has shifted from expansion to efficiency, productivity, and global standing. The session explored how sharper policy, smarter technology adoption, stronger private-sector discipline, and deeper talent development must align to transform momentum into sustainable competitiveness.

REDEFINING RETAIL COMPETITIVENESS

The discussion opened by reframing competitiveness in the Saudi context. While Saudi Arabia ranks 17th globally in overall competitiveness, panelists noted that headline positions do not fully reflect the dynamics of a rapidly transforming economy.

Competitiveness was defined across four pillars — economic performance, business efficiency, government efficiency, and infrastructure — with added emphasis on sector-level productivity and operational outcomes.

Retail competitiveness, in this view, is measured not by expansion alone, but by how effectively demand is converted into productivity, value creation, and sustainable private-sector growth. This requires moving beyond aggregate indicators toward granular metrics such as labor productivity, capital productivity, and total factor productivity across the retail value chain.

PRODUCTIVITY AS THE CORE ENGINE OF SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Productivity emerged as the central theme. Sustained gains were described as essential to long-term wage growth, price stability, and profitability. Examples included warehouse automation increasing throughput and improved labor efficiency across logistics and store operations.

From a policy perspective, focus is shifting toward metrics such as sales per square meter, inventory turnover, and supply-chain value leakage. Retail was positioned not simply as a fast-growing non-oil sector, but as a macroeconomic lever capable of easing cost-of-living pressures, supporting domestic manufacturing, and creating higher-quality employment.

COST OF DOING BUSINESS: THE STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT

The cost of doing business was identified as a key constraint on competitiveness. Rising regulatory, administrative, compliance, logistics, talent, and financing costs are compressing margins at a time when growth is more difficult to achieve.

Panelists emphasized that these burdens fall unevenly. Fixed fees can disproportionately affect smaller operators, limiting dynamism and innovation. A forthcoming National Trade Committee study will assess regulatory and fee impacts across the full business lifecycle — from establishment to scaling — benchmarking Saudi Arabia against regional and global peers and quantifying financial effects by business size.

GOVERNMENT'S ROLE: FROM EXPANSION TO EFFICIENCY

From a government perspective, competitiveness is no longer defined by retail's growth rate alone, despite it being the fastest-growing non-oil sector. The emphasis has shifted to how efficiently retail contributes to non-oil GDP, sustainable employment, balance-of-payments outcomes, and domestic value chains.

Policy priorities include regulatory streamlining, faster licensing, digital enablement, and reducing ecosystem friction. The goal is to enable "better retail" — better designed, better located, more digitized, and more integrated. A competitive retail sector was described as delivering broader economic spillovers, including price stability, stronger SMEs, and resilient job creation.

TECHNOLOGY, DATA, AND CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT

Technology was positioned as a critical enabler, particularly in meeting consumers where they already are. Messaging platforms such as WhatsApp were cited as among the fastest-growing engagement channels in the Kingdom, increasingly used for sales, service, and fulfillment.

Competitiveness now depends on hyper-localization, personalization, and real-time engagement at scale. AI tools allow retailers to deliver tailored experiences while improving efficiency. As consumers encounter seamless digital services in sectors from government to travel, expectations for retail continue to rise, increasing pressure on lagging operators.

TALENT, HUMAN CAPITAL, AND EMBEDDED CAPABILITY

A shift from quantitative to qualitative workforce development was a recurring theme. Retail competitiveness depends not only on job creation, but on skill depth, adaptability, and the ability to absorb international intellectual property into domestic institutions.

Attracting foreign investment and global brands is only part of the equation. Long-term competitiveness requires embedding knowledge, systems, and operational excellence locally. Retail academies and workforce programs were described as foundational, but insufficient without deliberate internalization of global best practices across the private sector.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS

Competitiveness cannot be delivered by government alone. While policy can reduce friction, private-sector players must evolve from footprint-driven expansion toward productivity-led growth.

This includes improving sales density, modernizing logistics, adopting data-driven decision-making, and partnering with domestic manufacturers and SMEs where viable. Retailers were encouraged to prioritize operational efficiency and resilience over short-term scale.

THE CEO VIEW: FROM MOMENTUM TO MATURITY

Saudi retail is entering a performance-driven phase. With demand secured, the task now is execution, raising productivity, lowering friction, and embedding capability. Competitiveness will depend on disciplined private-sector leadership and precise policy reform working in lockstep to anchor retail as a long-term pillar of the non-oil economy.

The middle class globally is being squeezed by two forces: inflation from below and taxation from above. Yet a healthy, robust middle class remains at the heart of a consumption-based economy.

Dr. Martyn Davies

Speakers: **Khalid Temairik**, Chief Executive Officer, Basamh Group / **Bandar Al Saidi**, Chief Commercial Officer, Panda Retail Company / **Ahmed Alkuhlani**, Vice President, Sunbulah Group

Moderator: **Mohammed Dhedhi**, Consumer & Retail Partner MEA, Kearney

Growth Through Localization and National Champions

Saudi Arabia's push for localization is reshaping how national brands scale and compete. The conversation focused on how national champions are built through relevance, capability, and ecosystem collaboration, illustrated through real-world Saudi brand examples.

REDEFINING LOCALIZATION BEYOND MANUFACTURING

Localization is a strategic operating model that determines where value is created, how decisions are made, and which capabilities are built over time.

Successful localization requires ownership of the end-to-end value equation. This includes brand building, consumer trust, talent development, and long-term commitment. The creation of enduring local brands is driven less by short-term volume and more by equity, consistency, and relevance to local consumers while meeting global standards.

RETAILERS AS PLATFORMS FOR NATIONAL CHAMPIONS

From Bandar Al Saidi's perspective, supporting local brands is both a commercial opportunity and a responsibility. Retailers play a critical role in identifying, nurturing, and scaling local products that resonate with Saudi consumers.

One example highlighted how a locally produced iced tea brand entered a category that had been largely flat year-on-year. By offering flavors and taste profiles tailored to local preferences, and by receiving favorable onboarding terms, the brand rapidly scaled from low single-digit share to approximately 25% market share in under two years. As a result, the overall category grew by 50%.

Private label also featured prominently as a localization lever. While private brands currently represent 2–3% of the Saudi market, appetite for increased penetration is growing. Roughly 50% of private label products are already produced locally, reinforcing the link between localization, pride of origin, and value creation.

BUILDING BRANDS THROUGH LOCAL CAPABILITY AND TRUST

Brand-building journeys shared by Khalid Temairik underscored the importance of consistency and cultural relevance. Long-standing Saudi brands have succeeded by embedding global quality standards into products designed specifically for local consumers, while remaining agile in response to evolving tastes, economic shifts, and channel dynamics.

Investment in talent, organizational culture, and brand capability was repeatedly cited as more critical than systems alone. Staying close to the market was highlighted as a non-negotiable requirement for relevance and resilience.

LOCALIZATION AS AN ECOSYSTEM PLAY

As Khalid Temairik noted, localization succeeds when manufacturers, retailers, regulators, and consumers operate as a connected ecosystem focused on shared value creation.

Examples of co-creation between manufacturers and retailers illustrated how collaboration goes beyond transactional relationships. Joint innovation, category development, and data-driven decision-making allow local brands to scale faster and more sustainably. Retailers bring real consumer insights, while local producers bring cultural understanding and agility.

LOCAL SOURCING AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

Ahmed Alkuhlani highlighted the replacement of imported bakery products with locally produced alternatives, creating benefits across employment, supply chain resilience, and customer value.

Another case shared by Mr. Alkuhlani focused on the development of a fully Saudi-produced Sidr honey, sourced from local beekeepers and manufactured, packaged, and distributed within the Kingdom. This initiative supports national agricultural objectives while introducing consumers to products rooted in local heritage and quality.

DATA, INSIGHT, AND IDENTIFYING THE NEXT CHAMPION

Advanced analytics and loyalty data are powerful tools in discovering and scaling emerging brands. Bandar Al Saidi shared that Panda's loyalty ecosystem includes 14 million customers, with 5 million verified users, offering a depth of insight far exceeding traditional research samples.

This data enables retailers and brand partners to move beyond transaction metrics toward understanding behavior, preferences, and category adjacencies.

FROM LOCAL SUCCESS TO GLOBAL AMBITION

Panelists agreed that succeeding locally is the essential foundation for international expansion. Saudi Arabia's open and competitive market forces brands to meet global standards from the outset.

Several Saudi brands have demonstrated this potential, exporting to 40+ countries across North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. For example, a Saudi honey brand ranks seventh globally and is listed with major international retailers, serving mainstream consumers. These successes were attributed to quality, relevance, strong R&D, and disciplined go-to-market strategies.

THE CEO VIEW: LOCAL AND GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS

Localization is a long-term growth strategy grounded in relevance, capability, and collaboration. National champions are built by listening closely to consumers, investing in people and culture, and working across ecosystems to create value at scale. Saudi brands are increasingly well positioned to compete globally, carrying local values and quality standards onto the world stage.

If you can win locally, there is nothing stopping you from winning regionally and even globally.

Ahmed Alkuhlani

Speakers: Princess Noura bint Faisal Al Saud, CEO, Jay3lle & Founder, Culture House / **Abdullah Alrugaib**, Co-Founder, eyewa / **Adnan Al-Khalaf**, CEO & Managing Director, L'azurde / **Bjorn Floot**, General Manager, Asteri / **Ali Shareif**, CEO, Fashion Retail

Moderator: Anne-Laure Malauzat, Partner, Bain & Company

Homegrown Rising in the Gulf Consumer Market

Across the Gulf, a new generation of consumer brands is emerging, shaped by cultural confidence, institutional support, and rapidly evolving consumer expectations. Why does this moment favor homegrown brands? How are operating models adapting to speed and personalization? What does it take for Gulf brands to scale locally while building credible global ambitions?

WHY THE MOMENT FAVORS HOMEGROWN BRANDS

The panel opened with a shared view that the timing for Gulf-born brands is uniquely favorable. Princess Noura described the region as living through a once-in-a-generation transformation, creating a powerful backdrop for new brand narratives to emerge. Consumers are increasingly seeking products and experiences that reflect identity, values, and originality.

Research referenced by Anne-Laure Malauzat highlighted that two-thirds of GCC consumers prefer homegrown brands, reflecting a shift toward authenticity and local storytelling. At the same time, Abdullah Alrugaib pointed out that institutional frameworks across the Kingdom and the region have lowered barriers to entry and accelerated scaling for emerging brands.

OPERATING MODELS BUILT FOR SPEED AND CONTROL

A theme was how operating models are evolving overall as trend cycles compress and expectations rise. Where speed to market once spanned weeks, some brands now move from trend identification to store presence in seven days, demanding supply chain control and faster decisions.

Panelists emphasized owning key elements of the value chain. Ali Shareif said control enables flexibility and faster replenishment. His group's vertically integrated footprint produces 1.5 million pieces annually, yet covers only 70% of production needs, highlighting demand scale and capacity pressure.

From a beauty perspective, Bjorn Floot described Asteri's direct-to-factory model and digital backbone as enablers of speed, scale, and omnichannel integration.

OMNICHANNEL AS A GROWTH IMPERATIVE

Abdullah Alrugaib argued that every business should be omnichannel, noting that eyewa's transition from pure e-commerce to physical retail unlocked deeper penetration and more sustainable customer acquisition economics.

In eyewear transitioning from pure e-commerce to omnichannel enabled deeper customer engagement through services such as eye testing, while also reducing customer acquisition costs.

Beauty brands echoed similar dynamics. Bjorn Floot, explained that Asteri, as a digital-first brand, rapidly expanded from e-commerce into pop-ups and now operates 13 standalone boutiques, alongside international wholesale partnerships such as Ulta Beauty. Enabling precise understanding of consumer behavior and faster scaling decisions.

THE CONSUMER: GLOBAL, YOUNG, AND HIGHLY PERSONALIZED

The session repeatedly challenged outdated assumptions about Gulf consumers. With 60% of the population under the age of 30, younger consumers are digitally fluent, globally exposed, and highly discerning. Their preferences are shaped by social platforms, travel, and global culture.

Personalization has therefore moved beyond broad segmentation to more nuanced, persona-driven models. In jewelry, Adnan Al-Khalaf noted that his brand now produces 5,000–6,000 designs annually to address variations by city, season, and consumer mindset. Color preferences, product formats, and storytelling increasingly vary not just by country, but by micro-audience.

LOCALIZATION AS CULTURAL AND EMOTIONAL RELEVANCE

Localization, panelists agreed, is less about restriction and more about resonance. Successful brands balance global design language with local cues, narratives, and cultural touchpoints. Physical retail was repeatedly positioned as a critical emotional anchor. While digital channels drive reach and efficiency, in-store environments enable immersion, storytelling, and brand connection. Experience, rather than transaction alone, was described as a prerequisite for sustained growth.

SCALING BEYOND THE GULF

Winning locally is the foundation for global expansion. Bjorn Floot described the operational complexity of scaling internationally in beauty while maintaining data ownership and brand control.

Ali Shareif highlighted the opportunity to expand Egyptian homegrown brands into the GCC, North Africa, and Africa, supported by stronger infrastructure and digital capabilities.

However, scaling globally requires discipline. Regulatory readiness, product registration, distribution partnerships, and cultural adaptation were cited as critical enablers.

THE CEO VIEW: CULTURAL CONFIDENCE, COMPETITIVE EDGE

Homegrown Gulf brands are rising on the strength of cultural confidence, consumer momentum, and enabling ecosystems. Those grounded in strong DNA, operational agility, and deep consumer connection are best positioned to scale sustainably. Ultimately, people and brand integrity define success. Talent, discipline across channels, consistent storytelling, and a refusal to compromise on quality are what protect long-term equity and competitive edge.

You have to have a strong DNA. Many brands look the same today, but without a clear story and a strong identity that resonates with your target audience, no one will connect with you.

Princess Noura bint Faisal Al Saud

Speakers: **Anas Al Qadi**, Chief Commercial Officer, Hamat / **Wesam Al-Hasmi**, Chief Commercial Officer, Jabal Omar Development Company / **Mohammad Alawi**, Vice Chairman of Board, TEAA Holding Company / **Konrad Kolankiewic**, Chief Commercial Officer, Knowledge Economic City (KEC)

Moderator: **Ahmed Boshnak**, Partner, Bain & Company

Mixed Use Developments of the Two Holy Cities

As Mecca and Medina advance under Vision 2030, mixed-use development is redefining how the two holy cities serve both pilgrims and residents. Industry leaders examined how integrated hospitality, retail, healthcare, and cultural assets are transforming ritual-centric environments into sustainable, experience-led destinations.

FROM RITUAL-CENTRIC CITIES TO EXPERIENCE-LED DESTINATIONS

The session opened with a shared recognition that Mecca and Medina are undergoing a fundamental evolution. Historically designed around the performance of religious rituals, both cities are now expanding their focus toward experience, dwell time, and quality of life for both pilgrims and residents.

INVESTOR PERSPECTIVE: FOOTFALL IS NOT THE CONSTRAINT

From an investor standpoint, the panel emphasized that demand in Mecca and Medina is structurally assured. High footfall is a constant, reinforced by Vision 2030 targets to reach 30 million Umrah visitors annually, alongside 2–3 million Hajj pilgrims. The opportunity therefore lies not in demand creation, but in capturing value through the right mix of assets and services.

One developer highlighted a portfolio spanning four projects across the two cities, including 50,000 square meters of gross leasable area in Mecca, designed to address gaps in hospitality, entertainment, food, and retail. Investment strategies are increasingly segmented to serve both visitors and residents, reflecting the permanent populations that underpin these cities year-round.

JABAL OMAR: A DESTINATION MODEL IN THE HEART OF MECCA

Jabal Omar was presented as a case study in destination-scale development. Located within walking distance of Al-Masjid Al-Haram, the development encompasses more than 80,000 square meters of retail GLA, over 7,000 hotel keys, and partnerships with nine international hotel operators.

Beyond hospitality and retail, the destination integrates non-commercial services, including a 100-bed hospital, reinforcing its role as an ecosystem rather than a standalone asset. The scale of demand is significant: Jabal Omar hosts approximately four million hotel guests annually, with 14–18 million retail visitors each year. Despite this traffic, panelists noted that retail participation remains below potential, presenting a clear opportunity for brands willing to invest.

OPERATIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE PILGRIM JOURNEY

From an operator perspective, reforms across the Hajj and Umrah ecosystem were described as transformative. Over the past six years, the sector has shifted from fragmented, agency-led models toward corporatized, digitally enabled structures aligned with Vision 2030.

Pilgrims are increasingly booking directly through B2C platforms, reducing intermediaries and creating a closer relationship between service providers and end consumers. Average stays are lengthening, and pilgrims are traveling in organized groups rather than individually, increasing demand for quality accommodation, dining, education, and cultural programming. These shifts require closer coordination between developers, operators, and government entities.

MEDINA'S ROLE

The session stressed that Medina is an essential pillar of the pilgrim journey. Knowledge Economic City outlined its strategy to serve both residents and visitors within a 6.8 million square meter master-planned development directly connected to the Haramain High Speed Rail.

Plans include agreements with 20 international hospitality operators and the delivery of approximately 11,000 hotel keys over the next five years, alongside 45,000 residential units. Retail and lifestyle infrastructure are being expanded to address long-standing quality gaps, with a flagship mall launching with nearly 30% of its tenant mix dedicated to food and beverage—a category currently underrepresented in Medina.

BEYOND RETAIL: EDUCATION, CULTURE, AND WELLBEING

Several panelists highlighted that future mixed-use developments must go beyond commerce. Opportunities exist to integrate museums, educational theaters, wellness facilities, gyms, and culturally appropriate entertainment, all aligned with Islamic values.

Examples included heritage storytelling along the Hijrah route between Mecca and Medina and the inclusion of edutainment concepts that enrich the pilgrim experience while extending dwell time. The consensus was that such elements enhance, rather than detract from, the spiritual journey when designed thoughtfully.

THE CEO VIEW: SCALE WITH SENSITIVITY

Looking ahead, panelists stressed deeper collaboration between government and the private sector. Demand is assured, but infrastructure, mobility, and crowd management remain critical priorities. Mixed-use development in Mecca and Medina stands among the world's most resilient investment plays, with long-term success dependent on integrated planning, operational coordination, and respect for the cities' spiritual significance.

Digital is the future. We need to embed it into our assets and make it central to how we operate.

Wesam Al-Hasmi

Social media

Generating millions of impressions, strong engagement rates and widespread digital conversation, the RLC Global Forum ignited real-time dialogue across all major social media platforms. The event reached a diverse global audience of industry leaders, decision-makers, policymakers and academics, further reinforcing its role as a catalyst for meaningful industry discourse worldwide.

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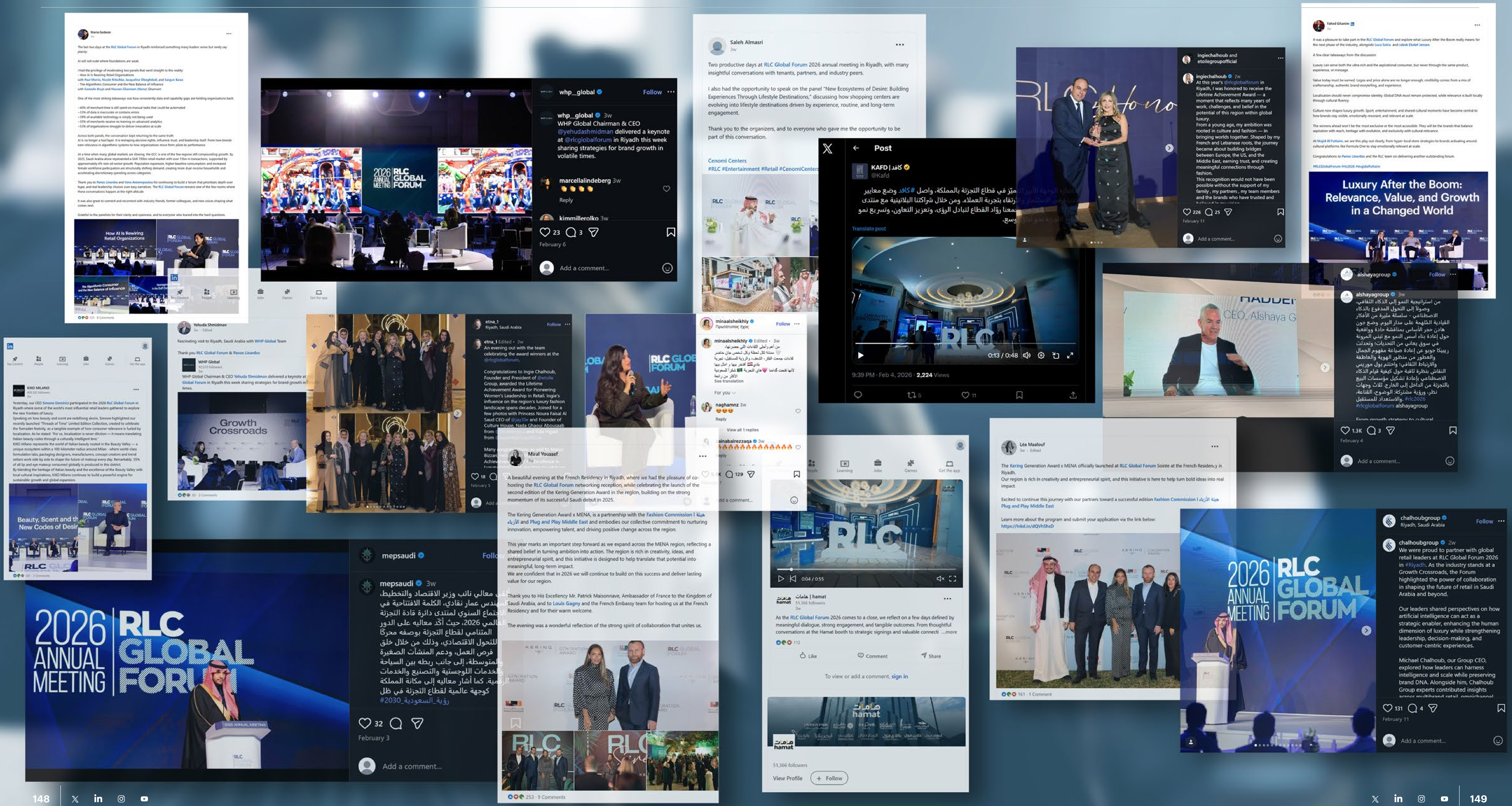
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WHP Global Chairman & CEO @yehudashmidman delivered a keynote at @rlcglobalforum in Riyadh this week sharing strategies for brand growth in volatile times.
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2026 ANNUAL MEETING RLC GLOBAL FORUM
Saleh Almasri
Two productive days at RLC Global Forum 2026 annual meeting in Riyadh, with many insightful conversations with tenants, partners, and long-term industry peers.
I also had the opportunity to speak on the panel "New Ecosystems of Desire: Building Experiences Through Lifestyle Destinations," discussing how shopping centers are evolving into lifestyle destinations driven by experience, routine, and long-term engagement.
Thank you to the organizers, and to everyone who gave me the opportunity to be part of this conversation.
Cenomi Centers
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Luxury After the Boom: Relevance, Value, and Growth in a Changed World
Growth Crossroads
Beauty, Scent and the New Codes of Desire
Miral Youssef
A beautiful evening at the French Residency in Riyadh, where we had the pleasure of co-hosting the RLC Global Forum networking reception, while celebrating the launch of the second edition of the Kering Generation Award in the region, building on the strong momentum of its successful Saudi debut in 2025.
The Kering Generation Award x MENA, is a partnership with the Fashion Commission | هيئة الأزياء and Plug and Play Middle East and embodies our collective commitment to nurturing innovation, empowering talent, and driving positive change across the region.
This year marks an important step forward as we expand across the MENA region, reflecting a shared belief in turning ambition into action. The region is rich in creativity, ideas, and entrepreneurial spirit, and this initiative is here to help translate that potential into meaningful, long-term impact.
We are confident that in 2026 we will continue to build on this success and deliver lasting value for our region.
Thank you to His Excellency Mr. Patrick Maisonnave, Ambassador of France to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and to Louis Gagny and the French Embassy team for hosting us at the French Residence and for their warm welcome.
The evening was a wonderful reflection of the strong spirit of collaboration that unites us.
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2026 ANNUAL MEETING RLC GLOBAL FORUM
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As the RLC Global Forum 2026 comes to a close, we reflect on a few days defined by meaningful dialogue, strong engagement, and tangible outcomes. From thoughtful conversations with partners at the Hamat booth to strategic signings and valuable connect ...more
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Léa Maalouf
The Kering Generation Award x MENA officially launched at RLC Global Forum Soirée at the French Residency in Riyadh.
Our region is rich in creativity and entrepreneurial spirit, and this initiative is here to help turn bold ideas into real impact.
Excited to continue this journey with our partners toward a successful edition Fashion Commission | هيئة الأزياء Plug and Play Middle East
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We were proud to partner with global retail leaders at RLC Global Forum 2026 in #Riyadh. As the industry stands at a Growth Crossroads, the Forum highlighted the power of collaboration in shaping the future of retail in Saudi Arabia and beyond.
Our leaders shared perspectives on how artificial intelligence can act as a strategic enabler, enhancing the human dimension of luxury while strengthening leadership, decision-making, and customer-centric experiences.
Michael Chalhoub, our Group CEO, explored how leaders can harness intelligence and scale while preserving brand DNA. Alongside him, Chalhoub Group experts contributed insights
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Essam Aljubair

In a conversation at the RLC Global Forum media studio, Essam Aljubair, Chief Operating Officer of Saudi Entertainment Ventures (SEVEN), shared how experience-led development is changing real estate in Saudi Arabia, shifting to emotionally connected, people-driven destinations aligned with Vision 2030.

”

On the shift from retail to experience...

Saudi consumers today are expecting more than just a standalone retail offering. Their expectations go beyond that, toward an experience-led theme that becomes a new social and emotionally driven concept.

This reflects a shift from a footfall-driven strategy to one based on experience, social activation, and, most importantly, building the right emotional connection with the community.

On real estate as integrated performance...

Retail real estate is no longer a standalone product. Value is created through integrated performance with other components. Today, 60–70% of the properties we are building are led by an entertainment component that drives footfall. We believe the F&B component anchors social activity, while community retail builds long-term relevance.

On building social infrastructure...

This is how we transform our properties into social hubs: social infrastructure that activates cities, builds on cultural strengths, and empowers talent.

By doing this, we are shifting from a traditional real estate concept toward people-driven development that cares for communities and builds the right social infrastructure for them.

On strategic partnerships...

We believe in positioning our partners as more than tenants. We position them as strategic partners who play an important role in providing the experience this extensive infrastructure was designed to deliver.

SETTING A NEW COURSE FOR COMMERCE

From cross-border trade to merchandising discipline, the rules of global commerce are shifting fast, putting long-standing playbooks under pressure. As new markets expand and digital platforms reshape access to consumers, retailers and brands are being forced to rethink how value is created and captured. Affordability, regulation, and technological disruption are influencing everything from pricing strategy to supply chain design. At the same time, sharper merchandising practices are becoming essential for maintaining relevance in highly competitive markets. Whether navigating cross-border e-commerce or redefining product strategy, companies must adapt quickly to a landscape where speed, precision, and commercial discipline increasingly determine success.

Speakers: **Abdel-Salam Bdeir**, CEO, SACO / **Ayman Beydoun**, CEO, BFL Group

Moderator: **Cyrille Fabre**, Senior Partner, Bain & Company, Middle East

Cross-Border Commerce at a Turning Point

As cross-border e-commerce accelerates across Saudi Arabia, it is reshaping competition, pricing, employment, and regulatory norms. What began as a marginal channel now accounts for a significant share of retail spend, raising urgent questions about parity, consumer protection, and long-term economic contribution.

DEFINING CROSS-BORDER COMMERCE AND ITS SCALE

The discussion began by clarifying what constitutes cross-border e-commerce. Unlike domestic e-commerce, where inventory is held and fulfilled within Saudi Arabia by locally registered entities, cross-border commerce involves shipments sent directly from outside the Kingdom to Saudi consumers. This distinction has significant implications for taxation, customs duties, compliance, and economic contribution.

In fashion alone, the scale is substantial. Saudi Arabia's fashion market was cited at approximately SAR 14 billion, with around SAR 5 billion roughly 31% coming from cross-border transactions. This segment is growing at double-digit rates annually, underscoring strong consumer demand driven by assortment breadth and pricing advantages.

REGULATORY ASYMMETRY AND COMPETITIVE IMPACT

Panelists emphasized that cross-border growth is not occurring on a level regulatory playing field. Domestic retailers operate under a comprehensive framework that includes product registration, customs duties, VAT, compliance with SASO and SABR standards, Saudization requirements, and corporate taxes or zakat. By contrast, cross-border shipments below SAR 1,000 benefit from customs duty exemptions, with the average basket size estimated at SAR 200–250, placing most transactions outside duty thresholds.

This disparity, the panel argued, creates a structural cost advantage for cross-border players while placing margin pressure on local and regional retailers that invest in physical assets, inventory, and workforce development within the Kingdom.

MACROECONOMIC AND EMPLOYMENT IMPLICATIONS

Beyond retail competition, the conversation widened to the broader economic impact. Saudi Arabia's total retail market size in 2025 was cited at SAR 385 billion, down from SAR 400 billion in 2018, signaling stagnation over a seven-year period. Cross-border and drop-shipment activity alone was estimated at SAR 65 billion, representing over 16% of total retail spend.

Employment trends reinforced these concerns. Retail employment declined from just over 2 million jobs in 2019 to approximately 1.7 million in 2024, at a time when domestic retailers face rising costs and competitive pressure from untaxed imports. Panelists highlighted the ripple effects: fewer local jobs, reduced demand for warehousing and logistics infrastructure, and lower economic circulation within the Kingdom.

CONSUMER SAFETY AND PRODUCT COMPLIANCE

A critical dimension of the discussion focused on consumer protection. Domestic retailers must ensure that every product from electrical plugs to toys and home fixtures meets Saudi safety, quality, and environmental standards. This process involves certification, fees, and time investment.

Cross-border shipments, by contrast, can enter the market without undergoing equivalent checks, raising concerns around safety risks, environmental compliance, and accountability. The panel stressed that regulatory frameworks in advanced economies such as the US and Europe increasingly prioritize consumer protection as the first principle of cross-border regulation, alongside fair competition.

GLOBAL REGULATORY RESPONSES AS REFERENCE POINTS

The session placed Saudi Arabia's situation in a global context. In the US, the removal of customs exemptions led to a rapid contraction of low-value imports. In Europe, parcel-level taxes of €3–€5 have been introduced alongside tighter safety requirements. Emerging markets including India, Indonesia, Turkey, and Brazil have implemented even stricter measures, ranging from reduced thresholds to outright platform restrictions.

These examples were not presented as templates, but as evidence that regulatory recalibration is increasingly viewed as necessary to protect consumers, employment, and domestic economic ecosystems.

THE CEO VIEW: POLICY OPTIONS FOR A FAIRER FRAMEWORK

The session concluded with a focus on alignment over restriction. Revisiting the SAR 1,000 customs exemption, introducing modest parcel-level duties, and requiring baseline product certification were positioned as pragmatic steps toward restoring competitive balance. Cross-border commerce is now structural to Saudi retail, but its long-term sustainability depends on parity: equal standards, equal obligations, and shared accountability that protect consumers, support employment, and reinforce domestic economic value.

Advanced markets first wanted to protect the consumer. They made it mandatory to meet country regulations when it comes to safety and environmental standards.

Abdel-Salam Bdeir

Speaker: Bandar Al Saidi, Chief Commercial Officer, Panda Retail Company
Interviewer: Andy Veitch, Managing Director & Partner, BCG

The New Merchandising Blueprint and the Race for Relevance

Merchandising is emerging as one of the most decisive levers of retail competitiveness in the Middle East. Drawing on new joint research from BCG and RLC Global Forum, Andy Veitch outlined the structural gaps and value opportunities, before joining Bandar Al Saidi of Panda Retail Company, for a discussion on what real transformation looks like in practice.

A TWO-SPEED RETAIL LANDSCAPE

BCG's global study of 250 retailers, complemented by more than 100 executive interviews, revealed a widening gap in merchandising maturity. While a small group of retailers—globally and in the Middle East—are approaching second- or even top-quartile capabilities, many remain at early stages. The result is a two-speed market, where leaders compound their advantage through better tools, talent, and governance, while laggards struggle to keep pace.

The research highlighted that leading organizations are moving away from deal-centric buying toward end-to-end category ownership. This shift reframes merchandising as a profit and growth driver with accountability for consumer relevance, margin, and long-term category value.

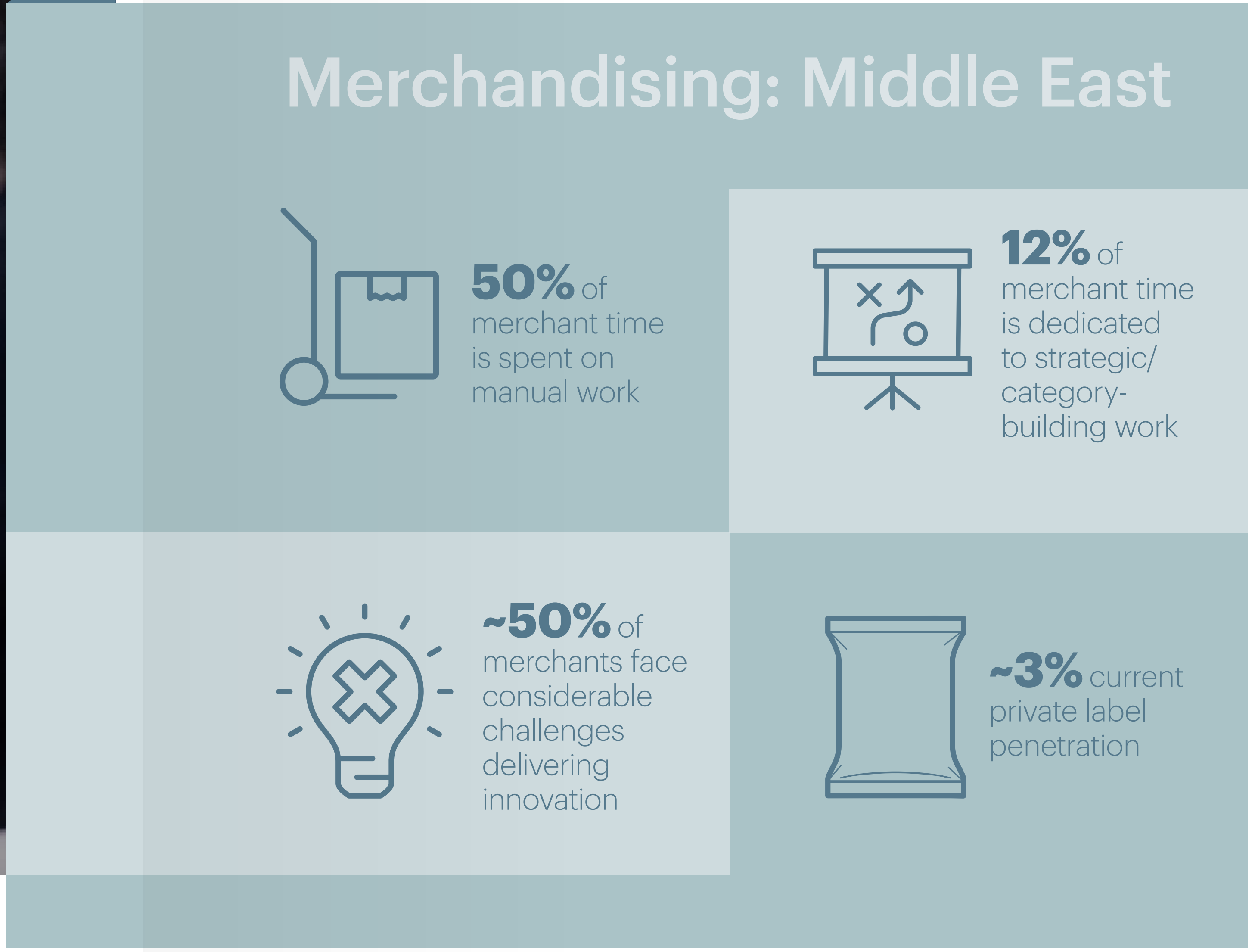
FREEING MERCHANT TIME FOR STRATEGIC VALUE

A critical constraint identified in the study is how merchants spend their time. Globally, only around 20% of merchant effort is focused on strategy and growth; in the Middle East, this drops to approximately 12%. Instead, teams remain absorbed by manual tasks, data management, and administrative work.

The opportunity is significant. By automating low-value activities and improving data quality, retailers can free up as much as 20 hours per week per merchant to focus on category strategy, innovation, and consumer insight.

AI AS A SCALE ENABLER

While most retailers believe AI will transform the industry, many have struggled to realize tangible returns. The research shows that leaders are already outperforming the market, achieving benefits at scale, but success depends less on algorithms and more on integration.



Embedding AI requires disciplined change management, governance, and capability building. Without these, technology investments fail to translate into impact. Where implemented effectively, AI is driving material gains across pricing, assortment, negotiations, and space optimization, contributing to overall profit improvements of 5–7% of sales, much of which is reinvested back into the business.

PRIVATE LABEL AND REGIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

Private label emerged as a major strategic opportunity for the Middle East. Currently accounting for only 2–3% of packaged food sales in the region, ambitions are rising toward 20–30% over the coming years. Achieving this shift will require a fundamental reset in how retailers prioritize private label, from shelf space to internal capabilities.

However, the report also acknowledged structural constraints, including the limited maturity of the regional supplier base.

PANDA'S TRANSFORMATION JOURNEY

Bandar Al Saidi of Panda Retail Company, provided a grounded perspective on what it takes to execute such a transformation. A key inflection point was the adoption of true category management, shifting buyers from transactional roles to business owners accountable for entire categories from the consumer's perspective. This mindset change preceded any major technology deployment and proved essential to later success.

Despite strong commercial capabilities, Al Saidi acknowledged execution consistency at store level as an ongoing challenge. In response, the company is investing in space, range, and design tools to improve planogram accuracy and communication, alongside launching an in-house merchandising company to regain end-to-end control.

Supplier collaboration has also evolved. The launch of the Panda Cube supplier portal now connects more than 300 suppliers, centralizing processes from item listing to promotions and logistics, and enabling more effective, scalable collaboration.

Furthermore, Panda's decision to establish an independent master data function underscored the importance of accuracy as a prerequisite for advanced analytics and AI.

Equally critical has been talent development. By promoting from within and building teams with strong analytical backgrounds, Panda has sustained institutional knowledge while equipping the organization with skills suited to a data-driven future.

THE CEO VIEW: GROWTH, RELEVANCE, TRANSFORMATION

Merchandising excellence is not optional. Retailers that anchor transformation in strong fundamentals, invest in people and data, and embed technology pragmatically are building a self-reinforcing engine for growth and relevance.

AI transformation often breaks down. Sometimes because retailers don't have the right tools or algorithms, but more often because those solutions are not properly embedded into the business.

Andy Veitch

Speakers: **Neeraj Teckchandani**, CEO, Apparel Group / **Sumeet Yadav**, Head, Reliance Brands Limited / **Charles Allen**, Senior Analyst, Retail, Bloomberg Intelligence (BI), Bloomberg L.P. London

Moderator: **Debashish Mukherjee**, Regional Lead Partner, Consumer & Retail, Middle East & Africa, Kearney

Cracking the Value Equation for Billions

Consumer markets across the Gulf, India, and wider emerging regions scale rapidly, with retailers facing a defining challenge: how to create profitable growth across vastly different income segments without diluting relevance or returns. This session explored how leaders are recalibrating value propositions, business models, and capital allocation to unlock long-term growth across both mass and premium consumer bases.

REFRAMING VALUE ACROSS THE CONSUMER PYRAMID

The discussion opened by challenging conventional assumptions about where value is created in retail. Growth opportunities exist across the full income spectrum, provided retailers move beyond narrow price-led definitions of value. With 80% of Saudi Arabia's population and 50% of the UAE earning below SAR 10,000 per month, much of the region's retail infrastructure continues to serve only a limited segment of consumers, constraining scale and growth.

Rather than treating affordability and aspiration as opposing forces, speakers highlighted the importance of designing assortments and experiences that evolve with consumers over time.

RELEVANCE AS THE CORE DRIVER OF VALUE CREATION

A recurring theme was that value is ultimately defined by relevance, not by absolute price. Consumer motivations vary widely by market, category, and moment of consumption. In emerging markets especially, growth tends to accelerate first in premium and luxury segments before cascading into mass categories, creating opportunities across the spectrum when timing and positioning are aligned.

India was cited as a clear example. According to figures shared by Sumeet Yadav, the country now has approximately 650 million people classified as middle class, with 45 million traveling abroad last year. These dynamics require retailers to continuously reassess what value means for each segment, rather than relying on static definitions tied to cost.

DESIGNING VALUE PROPOSITIONS BEYOND PRICE

Perceived value is shaped by multiple factors: assortment relevance, convenience, service, storytelling, and channel integration.

Neeraj shared how Apparel Group's portfolio—spanning value, bridge, and premium brands—relies on differentiated value maps for each concept. Initiatives such as 60-minute quick commerce delivery, enhanced store experiences, and localized assortments were cited as examples of how value is reinforced beyond pricing alone.

In categories such as beauty and premium apparel, service quality and experiential elements were described as equally critical to commercial performance.

MICRO-MARKETS AND LOCALIZED EXECUTION AT SCALE

A significant portion of the conversation focused on the operational realities of serving fragmented markets. Regional proximity does not imply consumer homogeneity. Within the GCC and across India, buying patterns, size profiles, climate needs, and cultural preferences vary widely even between neighboring cities.

Mr. Teckchandani detailed the Gorup's shift away from centralized decision-making toward fully localized merchandising and buying teams, particularly in Saudi Arabia. This transition was described as critical to unlocking growth in secondary cities.

Sumeet Yadav reinforced this view, describing India as a collection of tens of thousands of distinct micro-markets. Technology was highlighted as the primary enabler of scalable localization, with data from 45,000 zip codes informing store placement, assortment planning, and distribution strategies.

TECHNOLOGY, AI, AND PRODUCTIVITY AS STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES

Panelists emphasized that advanced analytics are now accessible across markets and price segments, enabling smarter assortment planning, demand forecasting, and inventory availability even for products priced as low as USD 5.

From a financial market's perspective, the importance of disciplined investment was underscored. While AI and automation offer significant upside, leaders stressed the need for clear return visibility, particularly in a sector defined by thin margins.

CAPITAL ALLOCATION IN A VOLATILE ENVIRONMENT

The session concluded with a discussion on capital allocation philosophy amid global uncertainty. Rather than framing focus and innovation as competing priorities, Yadav described a balanced approach centered on three areas: deep consumer insight, technology enablement, and talent development.

Investments in physical retail are significant, but the consensus was clear: sustainable growth requires simultaneous investment in customer understanding, systems, and people, with each reinforcing the other.

THE CEO VIEW: SCALING VALUE WITH PRECISION

Across regions and income levels, relevance and localization remain central. Retailers that combine deep consumer insight with technology-enabled agility will scale more profitably and build lasting loyalty. The opportunity is substantial, but success lies in disciplined execution and long-term value creation.

Value is not about how costly or expensive something is. Value is about relevance and being relevant to each consumer segment you aim to address.

Sumeet Yadav

Abdulrahman Elbalaa, Retail Leasing & Sales Director for KAFD, discusses how retail real estate in Saudi Arabia is shifting from transactional space to urban experience, and how mixed-use destinations are changing the role of retail within the city.

The shift is fundamental; **retail real estate in the region is evolving from being transaction-driven to experience and lifestyle-led**. Traditionally, developments focused on maximizing GLA and concentrating footfall within enclosed retail environments. Today, retail plays a much broader role as a catalyst for urban life.

At destinations like KAFD, retail is integrated into the fabric of the district, supporting how people work, live, and socialize rather than serving as a standalone shopping destination. Today's urban audience demands a seamless, 24/7 lifestyle.

The focus is on curating the right concepts in the right locations, activating streets, plazas, and pedestrian flows to create continuous energy throughout the day. Ultimately, successful curation ensures retail integrates seamlessly with public spaces and programming, contributing to a vibrant district experience while supporting long-term commercial performance.

At the leasing level, **Vision 2030 means prioritizing concepts that support economic diversification and lifestyle transformation**, attracting international brands entering Saudi for the first time, while equally empowering strong local concepts that reflect Saudi identity and entrepreneurship.

On the ground, Vision 2030 becomes a framework guiding who we bring, what experiences we create, and how we build sustainable ecosystems rather than just lease space.

Ultimately, **the discussion needs to shift from building retail space to building resilient urban experiences.**

The expert view

The future of retail real estate lies in mixed-use ecosystems where retail acts as a catalyst for urban life.

GROCERY AS AN ENGINE OF VALUE

Grocery has emerged as one of the most critical battlegrounds for value and scale. As margins tighten and competition intensifies, operators are rethinking formats and the role of experience in a traditionally price-led sector. Across the region, shifting consumer expectations, rising operational costs, and growing digital adoption are pushing retailers to evolve their strategies. Food service, convenience, and experiential dining are becoming central drivers of footfall and differentiation. At the same time, operational discipline remains essential for maintaining competitiveness in a high-volume business. The sector's next phase will depend on balancing efficiency with innovation while responding to increasingly value-conscious consumers.

Speakers: **Amarpal Sandhu**, CEO, Americana Restaurants / **Deem Albassam**, Founder & CEO, INDPT

Moderator: **Roy Hintze**, Deals Strategy & Operations Partner, PwC Middle East

From Food Service to Experience and the Next F&B Growth Engine

As mixed-use destinations compete for attention and dwell time, food and beverage has emerged as a primary driver of footfall, identity, and recurring revenue. This conversation explored how F&B is shifting from transactional service to experience-led strategy and what operators, developers, and platforms must recalibrate to scale growth without eroding margins or brand equity.

THE EVOLUTION FROM FUNCTION TO EXPERIENCE

F&B has shifted fundamentally over the past decade, with COVID accelerating the move from function to experience. Deem Albassam noted rising consumer expectations shaped by travel, global exposure, and a demand for novelty, while delivery growth has not diminished the desire for in-person connection.

Amarpal Sandhu outlined three phases: function (1950s–80s), service (1990s–2000s fast casual), and today's experience economy, driven by social media, younger generations, and values-led consumption. In Saudi Arabia, this transition has been especially pronounced.

AUTHENTICITY, CULTURE, AND LOCAL RELEVANCE

A central theme was the importance of cultural relevance in delivering authentic experiences. AlBassam emphasized that younger, locally rooted concepts are often more resonant than established brands that fail to adapt. Saudi Arabia's regional diversity requires bespoke approaches, with consumer behavior differing meaningfully between Riyadh, the Eastern Province, and other markets.

Social platforms were cited as powerful accelerators of trends, with TikTok in particular reshaping how products and experiences gain traction. Single-product concepts, once considered risky, are now achieving scale and relevance, provided they tap into local pride and cultural signals. National identity and localization were identified as decisive success factors in the Saudi market.

SCALING EXPERIENCE WITHOUT ERODING MARGINS

Sandhu noted that scale operators must define experience within the realities of their format. In the quick-service and limited-service segments, experience is delivered through consistent food quality, enhanced restaurant aesthetics, and "phygital" engagement across drive-throughs, kiosks, and digital touchpoints.

Americana's approach has evolved from uniform, region-wide campaigns to highly localized activations. At any given time, the company now runs five to ten distinct campaigns across different markets, reflecting regional and cultural nuance. This shift has enabled scalable personalization without undermining operational discipline.

Agility emerged as a critical capability. While product calendars are often set 12 months in advance, the ability to respond quickly to local insights can unlock significant upside. Sandhu cited the rapid launch of a locally inspired product in Saudi Arabia, introduced with minimal media spend, which achieved strong resonance by tapping into national taste preferences.

DEFENSIBILITY IN A CROWDED MARKET

As competition intensifies, defensibility has become a strategic priority. AlBassam argued that category selection is a key determinant of long-term success. Highly saturated segments such as coffee and burgers attract rapid replication, while more complex culinary categories, bakeries, and experience-led formats offer greater barriers to entry.

People and product were identified as the core sources of defensibility. Talent scarcity, operational complexity, and the difficulty of replicating high-quality food experiences create natural protection.

AGGREGATORS: ACCESS VERSUS SUSTAINABILITY

Delivery aggregators have expanded access and accelerated growth, but the model is under strain. In Saudi Arabia, heavy discounting and commissions—often exceeding 30%—have created a "race to the bottom," pressuring unit economics and acting as a second landlord for operators.

Sandhu cautioned that the imbalance between demand, supply, and logistics is unsustainable, with market correction likely over the next 12–24 months. Albassam added that aggregators risk reducing F&B to pure convenience, diluting brand equity and undermining experience-led differentiation.

REDEFINING THE DEVELOPER–OPERATOR RELATIONSHIP

The discussion turned to the evolving role of developers. Both speakers agreed that F&B's ability to drive frequency, dwell time, and destination appeal requires a shift from transactional leasing to strategic partnership. More sophisticated developers are beginning to cluster F&B intentionally, aligning tenant mix with catchment demographics and lifestyle positioning.

THE CEO VIEW: GROUNDED GROWTH

Sustained success will depend on staying deeply connected to customers, balancing creativity with commercial discipline, and building organizations that combine operational excellence with cultural insight. Experience is the core growth engine. Those who ground strategy in lived consumer reality, rather than boardroom assumptions, are best positioned to thrive in the next phase of the F&B landscape.

Gen Z and Gen Alpha go to places where they identify with the brand's values, feel recognized, and experience an emotional connection.

Amarpal Sandhu

Speakers: **Bobby Rajendran**, CEO, Tamimi Markets / **Abdullah Al Sabban**, COO & CEO Advisor, Panda Retail Company

Moderator: **Hisham Abdul Khalek**, Partner & Managing Director, AlixPartners

The Future of Grocery Retail

Grocery remains one of retail's most essential and resilient sectors, yet it is undergoing rapid structural change. In Saudi Arabia, retailers are adapting to shifting consumer missions, digital disruption, and margin pressure while balancing value, convenience, and experience in an increasingly complex operating environment.

SERVING TWO MASTERS: HUMANS AND ALGORITHMS

The future grocery challenge was framed as serving two customers at once: the human shopper seeking value, health, and convenience, and the emerging AI shopping agent driven by structured data, price transparency, and product attributes.

This shift is reshaping assortment, pricing, and execution. E-commerce, convenience, and discount formats are accelerating, omnichannel is becoming fully integrated commerce, and grocers are increasingly competing with restaurants for share of stomach.

QUICK COMMERCE: A MISSION, NOT A MODEL

Quick commerce was addressed as both an opportunity and a transitional phenomenon. Bobby Rajendran described it as serving a specific customer mission, such as urgent, immediate-need purchases. While it captures incremental demand, history from markets such as the UK and the US suggests consolidation over time.

In Saudi Arabia, quick commerce is expected to remain, but not at its current scale or intensity. The underlying economics, however, will ultimately determine which models endure.

DISCOUNTERS, VALUE, AND ECONOMIC REALITY

Rajendran highlighted that aggressive price wars, including extreme promotions, are structurally unsustainable.

Tamimi Markets' response has been selective participation through private labels and targeted value offers, rather than wholesale price discounting. Rajendran noted that while modern grocery stores typically require investments of approximately SAR 20 million per location, some discount formats are being built at SAR 8–15 million.

CUSTOMER SEGMENTATION AND STORE-LEVEL EXECUTION

Abdullah Al Sabban emphasized deep customer segmentation as the foundation for operational decisions. Panda Retail has defined distinct shopper profiles — including value hunters, tech-savvy consumers, and young professionals — each with different expectations and missions.

This segmentation shapes store design, assortment, and service models. Net Promoter Score is used across locations to capture real-time feedback. People remain the key differentiator, with investment in store-level talent and leadership. Around 12% of Panda stores are now led by Saudi women, strengthening connection with the predominantly female customer base and increasing time spent in-store.

FORMAT FLEXIBILITY AND COMPETING FOR CONVENIENCE

Both speakers stressed that no single format fits all locations or customer segments. Panda's strategy spans supermarkets and hypermarkets, with flexibility in size, range, and service depending on neighborhood demographics. Hypermarkets remain central to large-basket missions, while ready-to-eat offerings are increasingly important for time-pressed customers.

Grocery retailers are also expanding their role in foodservice, developing private brands and in-store offerings that compete directly with restaurants.

RETAIL MEDIA AND ECOSYSTEM MONETIZATION

Ecosystem monetization emerged as a critical profitability lever for the future. Rajendran pointed to global benchmarks, noting that Walmart's retail media business generates approximately USD 2.85 billion, with around 85% flowing to the bottom line.

Tamimi Markets has established a dedicated retail media function, hiring leadership before building the capability, and is actively working with partners to expand this revenue stream. Data monetization, supported by loyalty and sales data, is being pursued within the Kingdom's privacy frameworks, creating new value pools beyond traditional retail margins.

SUPPLY CHAIN AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Supply chain strength was highlighted as foundational to grocery resilience. Panda operates a fleet of more than 500 trucks and two main distribution centers across the Kingdom. Rather than building separate dark stores, Panda leverages its existing store network for e-commerce fulfillment, improving capital efficiency.

AI-enabled forecasting and replenishment are used to improve availability while reducing cost to serve.

THE CEO VIEW: DISCIPLINE AS STRATEGY

The future of grocery retail will be shaped by disciplined economics, sharper execution, and ecosystem thinking. Value will remain essential, but it must be delivered through sustainable models rather than short-term price wars. Retailers must understand customer missions at a granular level, invest in people and supply chains, and unlock new profit pools through data, media, and integrated commerce.

It's about having the right people serving our customers and developing the capabilities they need to meet those expectations.

Abdullah Al Sabban

Value retail, grocery and commercial discipline

In an era of margin pressure and evolving consumer expectations, grocery and value retail are being reshaped by productivity, disciplined merchandising, operational rigor, and smarter capital allocation.

Consumers in the region are increasingly excited by experiences. Finding and delivering the right ones is what ultimately allows brands to flourish.

Deem Albassam
Founder & CEO, INDPT

Retailers who are not willing to modernize their commercial and merchandising model will see the gap widen. It is a process and it takes time, but it is not a luxury.

Bandar Al Saidi
Chief Commercial Officer, Panda Retail Company

The current state of the market is a race to the bottom and nobody's going to survive that race.

Bobby Rajendran
CEO, Tamimi Markets

Three big challenges retail CFO's are facing today; number one is value retailing. Number two is an evolving consumer. And number three, the speed of disruption in technology.

Karl Nader
Partner & Managing Director, AlixPartners

We have a Triple-A strategy for our FMCG business: achieve above-market growth in our core categories, advance into adjacencies, and acquire where we can leverage our assets.

Wajid Khan
Group CFO, Savola Group

Either we improve productivity, or we drive cost efficiency and operational excellence, or we pursue initiatives that enhance the consumer experience.

Jacqueline Elboghdadi
Chief Marketing Officer, ADNOC Distribution

Today, retail competitiveness is no longer about how fast the sector is growing. It's about how efficiently it operates and how effectively it translates demand into economic value.

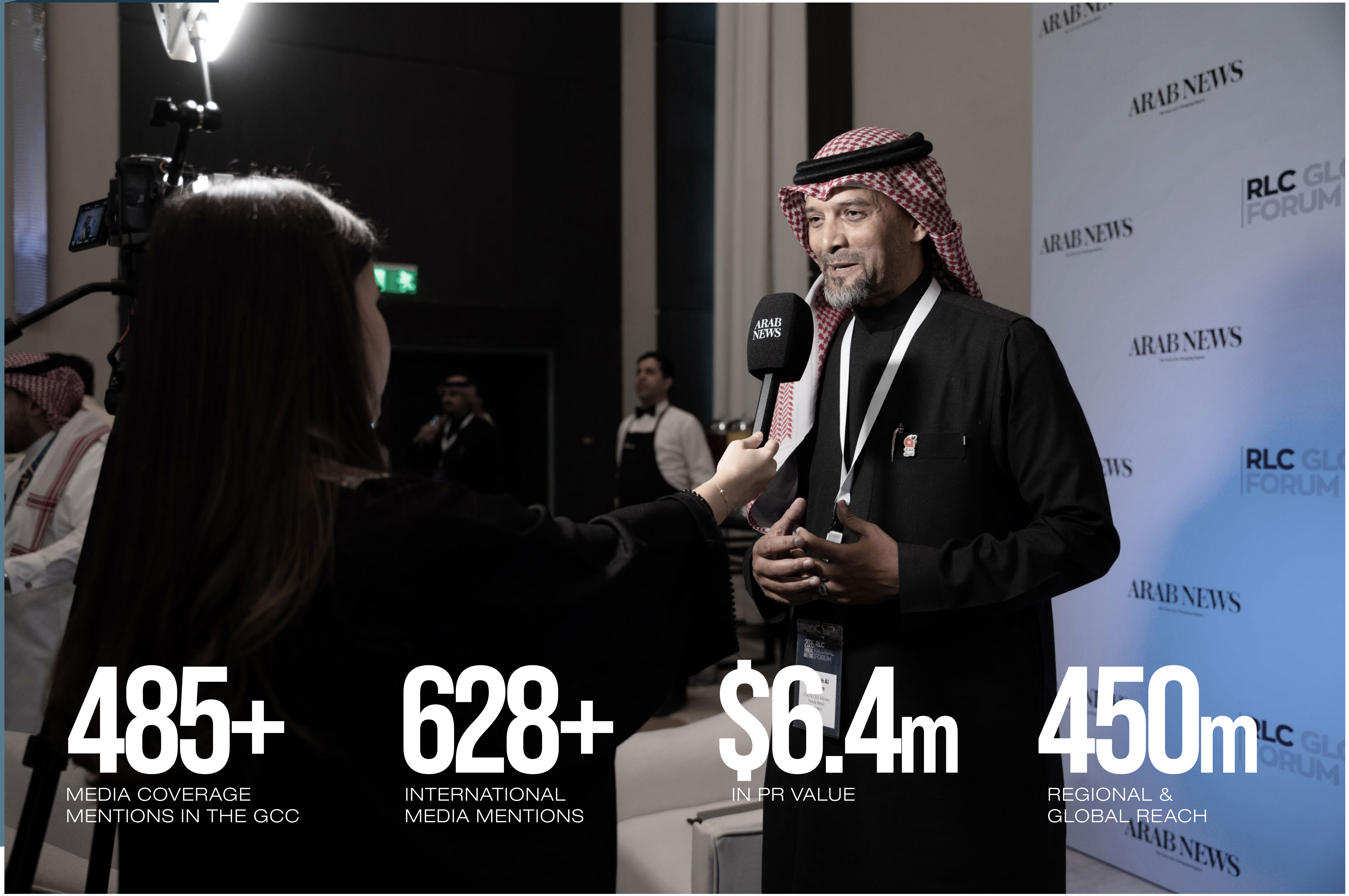
Farah Ismail
Deputy Minister, Ministry of Economy and Planning, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The biggest challenge anywhere in the world is balancing supply and demand.

Mohammad Alawi
Vice Chairman of Board, TEAA Holding Company

Media coverage

With more than 1,000 media mentions worldwide and a global reach in the millions, the 2026 RLC Global Forum in Riyadh further strengthened its international influence across the retail, real estate, business, lifestyle and technology sectors. The Forum continues to reinforce its position as the premier industry platform in the GCC and an increasingly significant voice on the global stage.



485+
MEDIA COVERAGE MENTIONS IN THE GCC

628+
INTERNATIONAL MEDIA MENTIONS

$6.4m
IN PR VALUE

450m
REGIONAL & GLOBAL REACH


ARAB
NEWS


CNBC
عربية


ARAB
NEWS


ARAB
NEWS


ARAB
NEWS

Cenomi Centers' Westfield Riyadh to open in September: CBDO

Dennis Michael, Chief Business Development Officer (CBDO) at Arabian Centres Co. (Cenomi Centers)

Dennis Michael, Chief Business Development Officer (CBDO) at Arabian Centres Co. (Cenomi Centers), said that the Westfield Riyadh project, located in the Al-Raed district, remains on schedule and is expected to open in September 2026.

RLC Global Forum 2026 to Convene in Riyadh as Global Growth Crossroads Emerge

yahoo/finance

This is a paid press release. Contact the press release distributor directly with any inquiries.

CISION

PR Newswire
September 15, 2025 · 2 min read

Against a backdrop of shifting cross-border commerce, evolving consumption patterns, and the global AI imperative, the RLC Global Forum returns to Riyadh to shape the future of retail and consumer-facing industries at a defining moment for growth.

Saudi Retail's New Message to Global Brands: Adapt or Miss Out

WWD

Shifting markets and AI innovation set the stage for retail's next era

RLC GLOBAL FORUM

Partnerships, debates set the stage for investment, innovation and urban transformation

We find ourselves at what we call a growth crossroads.

Panos Linardos

Alshaya posts strong 2025 performance, retail growth seen in 2026: CEO

John Hadden, CEO of Alshaya Group

John Hadden, CEO of Alshaya Group, said the company delivered a strong performance in 2025, expressing satisfaction with business results and customer satisfaction levels.

منتدى قادة التجزئة العالمي 2026 في الرياض يختتم أعماله ويعزز أجندة التجزئة العالمية نحو المستقبل

RLC GLOBAL FORUM LAUNCHES FIRST INDUSTRY-LED NEXTGEN RETAIL INITIATIVE IN SAUDI ARABIA

RLC Global Forum places Kingdom at center of future of retail

The RLC Global Forum is a critical catalyst in translating Vision 2030's ambitions into a resilient, global market reality.

Panos Linardos

Taking place next month, the RLC Global Forum will bring together more than 2,000 global leaders, policymakers, and innovators from over 40 countries.

HIGH-LEVEL DIALOGUE

Saudi Fashion Commission, RLC Global Forum Collaborate on Riyadh-based Initiatives

WWD

RLC Global Forum 2026 to Convene in Riyadh as Global Growth Crossroads Emerge

AP

الرئيس التنفيذي لـ أراد العقارية السعودية لـ CNBC عربية: نجير 16 مشروعاً حالياً وقيمة محفظتنا تتجاوز 4 مليارات ريال

Saudi retail sector 'booming,' industry experts confirm at RLC Global Forum

RECOGNITION

Saudi retail sector 'booming,' say industry leaders

Vision 2030 sets the framework for what we are all trying to achieve.

RLC GLOBAL FORUM

Luxury, AI, and experience-led retail fuel Saudi Arabia's market growth

Experts highlight Gen Z consumers, digital integration, and new growth models under Vision 2030

10 key take-aways from the 2026 RLC Global Forum

1 GEOECONOMICS RESHAPING THE CONSUMER LANDSCAPE

Retail no longer operates in a stable global trade environment. Capital flows, regionalization, shifting alliances and economic fragmentation are reshaping supply chains, investment decisions and consumer confidence. Leaders must build resilience into their models as the world moves from frictionless globalization to strategic realignment.

2 GROWTH WILL COME FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Saudi Arabia, India, Southeast Asia alongside other high-growth emerging consumer markets are central to the next chapter of retail expansion. And should be treated as such. With young, digitally native populations, expanding middle classes and unprecedented infrastructure investment, these economies are becoming the primary engines of sector growth.

3 WE ARE COMPETING FOR SHARE OF TIME

Retail competes as much for consumer time and attention as it does for wallet. The real advantage lies in becoming part of how people live, and not only how they shop. Successful destinations blend retail, entertainment, culture, hospitality and F&B into environments that people choose to spend time in. Repeatedly.

4 PLATFORMS CREATE STRUCTURAL ADVANTAGE

Value creation is shifting toward integrated platforms that combine physical assets, digital infrastructure, data, and services. The strongest operators are building interconnected environments that generate recurring engagement, cross-traffic and insight, reducing dependence on single-asset performance.

5 AI IS A COMPETITIVE MULTIPLIER

AI is emerging as a decision engine across forecasting, merchandising, workforce planning and personalization. Its real power lies in strengthening human judgment, enhancing creativity, precision and responsiveness. The competitive edge comes from integration, not automation alone.

6 MERCHANDISING DRIVES MARGIN

Assortment discipline, pricing architecture and inventory precision are central to profitability in pressured markets. Like-for-like performance remains the clearest indicator of brand health. Growth without merchandising rigor erodes margin, while disciplined curation protects it.

7 FASHION'S NEXT CHAPTER: CRAFT MEETS INTELLIGENCE

In the era of artificial intelligence, the emphasis shifts on artisanal intelligence. Technology expands creative tools, but craftsmanship, identity and cultural interpretation remain the core drivers of desirability. Fashion's advantage lies in translating heritage into contemporary relevance without losing authenticity.

8 LUXURY IS ENTERING ITS DISCIPLINE ERA

After years of accelerated growth, luxury is recalibrating. Sustainable performance now depends on pricing discipline, controlled distribution, cultural relevance and long-term brand equity. Growth for its own sake is no longer a strategy; value perception and desirability are.

9 LEADERSHIP DEFINES LONGEVITY

Long-term performance does not happen by accident. From capital allocation and creative conviction to pricing discipline and regional expansion, sustained success is shaped at the very top. In periods of market volatility, leadership requires both conviction and adaptability: the ability to listen closely to consumer behavior, recalibrate in real time and adjust course without losing strategic clarity. Organizations must strike the balance between ambition and governance, boldness and disciplined execution.

10 CONSUMERS SET THE AGENDA

Influence nowadays moves through creators, peer networks and algorithmic recommendation systems before it reaches the checkout. Demand builds gradually, through visibility across feeds, scrutiny in public threads, peer endorsement and repetition in digital spaces, as much as through traditional campaigns. For brands to stay relevant, the answer is clear: engage in culture to build authority that translates into demnand.

WELCOME TO

RLC Honors

Celebrating legacy & impact

More than 200 retail leaders gathered on February 3, in a private, invitation-only setting, for the 2026 RLC Honors, the industry's highest distinction, reserved for visionaries whose contributions have reshaped the global marketplace. Hosted in partnership with Hamat Holding, the annual Honors Dinner convened a distinguished audience to recognize leadership and enduring impact at the highest level of international business.

This year, two exceptional figures were presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award: **Marco Bizzarri, entrepreneur and investor**, whose transformative leadership has shaped some of the world's most iconic luxury brands, and **Ingie Chalhoub, Founder and President of Etoile Group**, a pioneering force in building and scaling luxury retail across the Middle East. Their careers embody bold decision-making, global vision, and an unwavering commitment to innovation and growth.

Beyond a recognition of past accomplishments, the evening reflected the values shaping retail's future: courage, long-term vision, creativity, and cultural intelligence.

> Our strength goes beyond the destinations we create, extending to our team and the way we do business. We look forward to engaging with industry leaders at the RLC Global Forum and contributing to the next chapter of retail.

Abdullah Al Tamimi
CEO, Hamat

Behind the scenes

Beyond the panels, presentations and keynotes, these candid moments reveal the conversations, connections and chemistry that shaped the spirit of the 2026 RLC Global Forum, proving that influence is often forged between sessions.


GROWTH
RLC GLOBAL FORUM


FASHION مستقبل
الأزياء FUTURES


AMERICAN EXPRESS
BON APPÉTIT
HOUSE of GRILL
RLC GLOBAL FORUM

THE HYBRID HALL

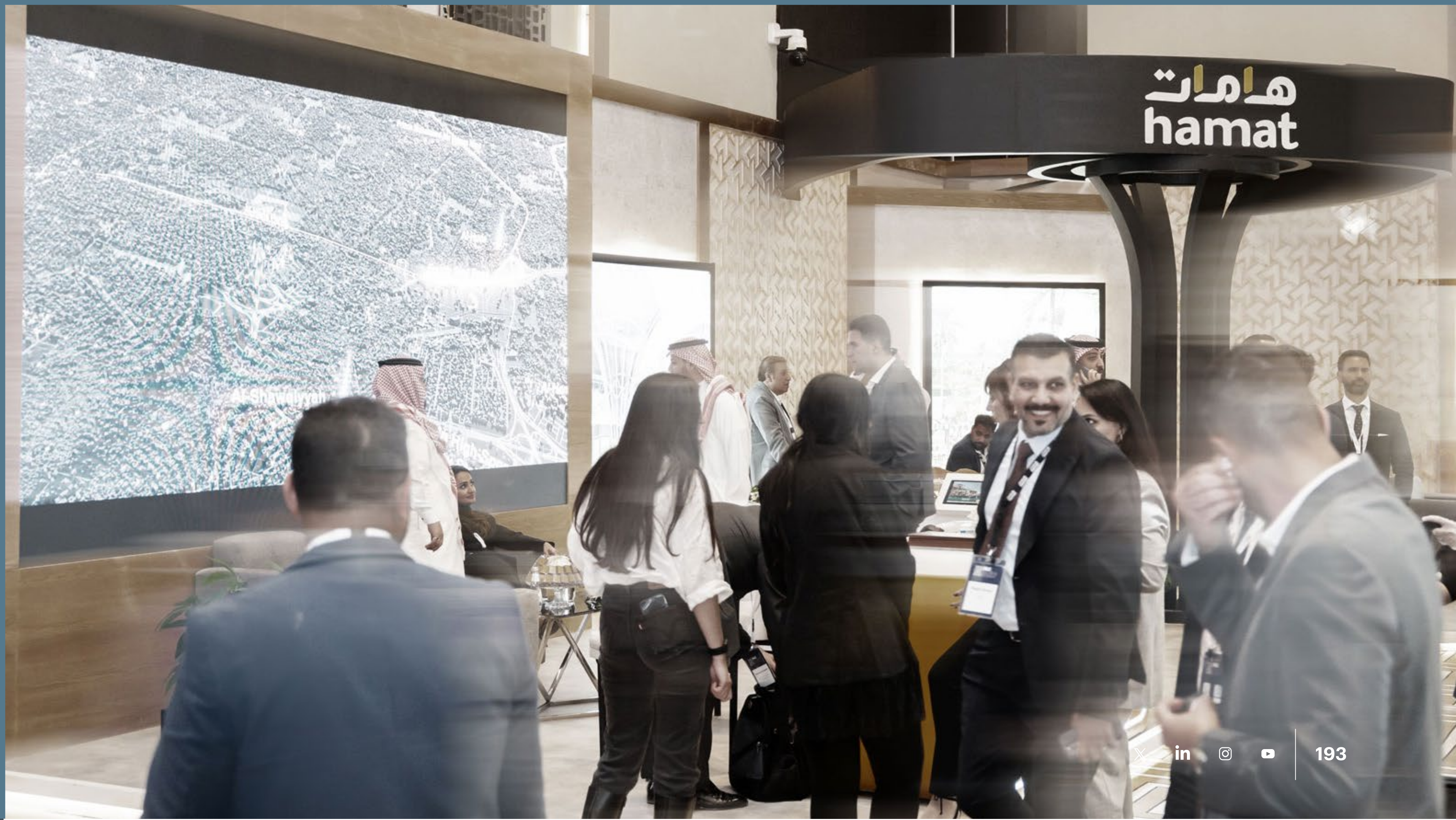
A DYNAMIC SPACE WHERE INNOVATION, COLLABORATION AND BOLD IDEAS CAME TO LIFE

18,500 SQUARE FEET EXPERIENTIAL SPACE


cenomi
CENOMI


panda
بنده


red
وجهات التسوق العقارية
Retail Experience Destinations
VR EXPERIENCE
أزاد العقارية
AZAD PROPERTIES


هامات
hamat


2026 ANNUAL MEETING
RLC GLOBAL FORUM
GROWTH CROSSROADS
APPAREL GROUP
EXCEED EXPECTATIONS EVERYDAY
APPAREL GROUP
EXCEED EXPECTATIONS EVERYDAY
APPAREL GROUP
RLC


KAFD
مركز الملك عبدالله المالي
THE TOTE BAG


CHALHOUB GROUP


STARBUCKS
STARBUCKS
GROWTH CROSSROADS
CIRCLE K
STARBUCKS


نكهات من قلب مكة


شركة أسواق البحر الأحمر المحدودة
RED SEA MARKETS COMPANY LIMITED
رد سي مول
RED SEA MALL
RASM


SACO
ساكو
GROWTH
CROSSROADS


A New Retail and
Entertainment Capital


SEVEN
مشاريع الترفيه السعودية
ENTERTAINMENT VENTURES
FASHION
FUTURES
مستقبل
الأزياء

Partnership stage

At the heart of the Hybrid Hall, the Partnership Stage was the setting where 15 strategic partnerships and MOUs were formally signed. Covering experiential retail, entertainment and leisure, food and beverages, lifestyle brands, and mixed-use commercial development, these agreements advanced cross-industry collaboration, market expansion and innovation-led growth across the region and beyond.

NextGen Retail Challenge

Bridging Ambition and Opportunity

Powering the future of Saudi retail

Saudi Arabia's next generation of retail leaders took center stage at the 2026 RLC Global Forum, marking the culmination of the Kingdom's first industry-led retail talent initiative: the NextGen Retail Challenge.

Launched by RLC Global Forum in partnership with Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University's Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center and Monsha'at, and supported by Tamara, the program united academia and industry in a structured effort to transform ideas into commercially viable solutions aligned with the Kingdom's Vision 2030.

Over five intensive hackathon days, 80 participants across 16 teams moved beyond theory, engaging in expert mentoring, validation workshops, and on-site visits to leading retail environments. The result: market-ready concepts grounded in operational reality and scalability.

The three winning teams were

1 **Mersad**
A smart branch operating system enabling real-time retail execution and performance visibility.

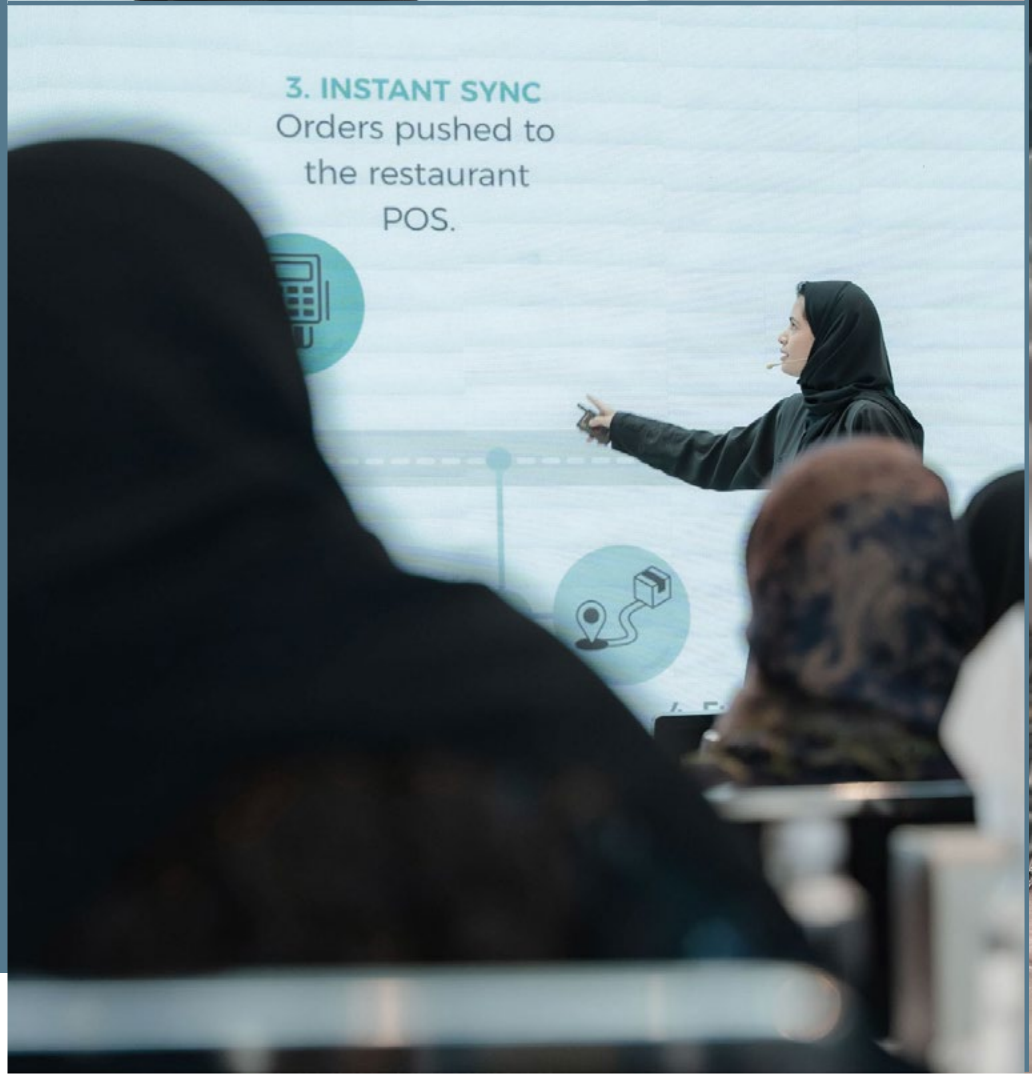
2 **BiteBox**
Secure, temperature-controlled workplace food delivery hubs addressing last-mile efficiency.

3 **Riyal**
An AI-powered unified retail intelligence platform providing consolidated performance insights.

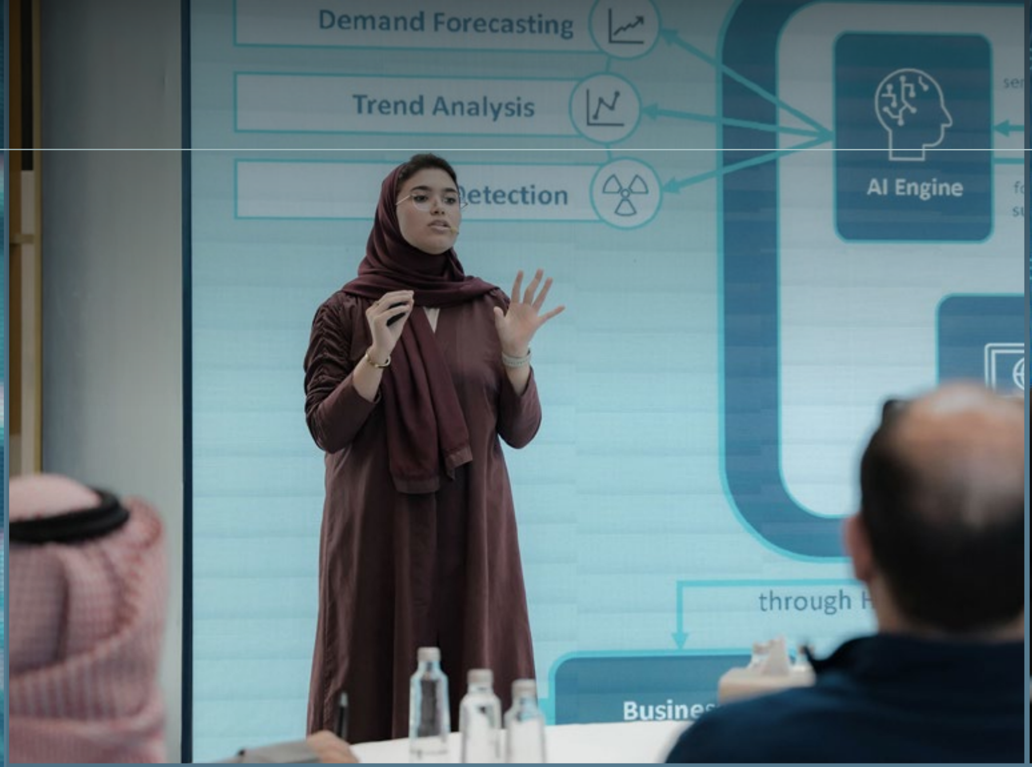
NextRetail GenChallenge

Bridging Ambition and Opportunity

The inaugural Challenge established a national model for collaboration across academia, industry, and government, placing the mentoring and empowering of young talent at the center of sector development; a priority shared wholeheartedly by RLC Global Forum as it works to strengthen a future-ready Saudi retail ecosystem.




BUILT WITH
tamara


Demand Forecasting
Trend Analysis
AI Engine


Our Focus
25%


FINALS


RLC GLOBAL FORUM
NextRetail GenChallenge
2nd place winner
Bite Box
SAR
15,000
tamara

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

cenomi سينومي

بنده panda

HEADLINE PARTNERS

هامات hamat

APPAREL GROUP SINCE 1996 EXCEED EXPECTATIONS EVERYDAY

أزاد العقارية AZAD PROPERTIES

red Retail Experience Destinations

PLATINUM PARTNERS

CHALHOUB GROUP SINCE 1955

مجموعة الشايع ALSHAYA GROUP

KAFD

SEVEN SAUDI ENTERTAINMENT VENTURES

PRINCIPAL PARTNER

FASHION FUTURES

OPENING RECEPTION PARTNER

KERING

DESTINATION PARTNER

DIRAH DEVELOPMENT

NEXTGEN RETAIL CHALLENGE PARTNERS

جامعة الأميرة نورة بنت عبدالرحمن Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University

منشآت monsha'at Small & Medium Enterprises General Authority

tamara

GOLD PARTNERS

Meta

trendyol

Google

مجموعة السليمان Alsulaiman Group

ساكو SACO

KNOWLEDGE ECONOMIC CITY

RED SEA MALL

THE POINT

NETWORKING LUNCH PARTNER

AMERICAN EXPRESS

KNOWLEDGE PARTNERS

McKinsey & Company

pwc

BCG

AlixPartners

KEARNEY

BAIN & COMPANY

SILVER PARTNERS

MIRAKL

الأندلس العقارية Alandalus Property

Patchi

MEDIA PARTNER

ARAB NEWS

ASSOCIATION PARTNER

IADS

أزاد العقارية
AZAD PROPERTIES

LEADING WITH VISION, SUCCEEDING THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

Azad Properties is a Saudi-based development and asset management platform with a growing footprint across retail, commercial, and industrial real estate.
Founded in 2017, it develops and manages innovative, sustainable destinations aligned with Saudi Vision 2030, creating environments that drive long-term value for stakeholders and support Saudi Arabia's economic growth.

16
PROPERTIES

4
CITIES IN KSA

+1.4M SQM
TOTAL OF GLA

+35
AWARDS

الظهران مول
Dhahran Mall

Gross/ leasable area
83,021 SQM

271
Total Units

61
Total Kiosks

Dhahran Mall

It is one of the largest shopping centres in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, combines retail, leisure and events: helps create more of a lifestyle destination rather than just a mall.

red
وجهات التسوق العقارية
Retail Experience Destinations

www.redmalls.com

TAJDEED
Where Memories Are Renewed, & New Ones Begin


DIRAH DEVELOPMENT
DEVELOPING A VIBRANT CULTURAL DESTINATION IN THE HEART OF HISTORIC RIYADH.
PLACING PEOPLE AT THE CENTER OF THE EXPERIENCE.
القيصرية
ALQAISAREYAH
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DIRAH DEVELOPMENT
WWW.DIRAHDEVELOPMENT.SA


Where innovation meets sustainability
KERING
CREATIVITY IS OUR LEGACY
PLUGANDPLAY
هيئة الأزياء
Fashion Commission
In 2017, as part of its Sustainability strategy, Kering in collaboration with Plug and Play launched the first edition of the Kering Generation Award in China to support startups with a positive environmental and social impact. Since then, the Kering Generation Award has been launched in Japan and in the Middle East and North Africa region. In MENA, the program is implemented in partnership with the Saudi Fashion Commission.
Kering, 40, rue de Sèvres, Paris 7e - RCS Paris 552 075 020
Creativity is our Legacy : La créativité, notre héritage


trendyol
trendyol
trendyol

RASM: Shaping Integrated Urban Destinations

RASM is a Saudi development and property management company dedicated to shaping integrated urban destinations that combine retail, hospitality, entertainment, and community experiences. Through a holistic approach that spans planning, design coordination, leasing strategy, and asset performance, the company leads projects from concept to operation while ensuring long-term value creation for partners and stakeholders.

RASM's growing portfolio reflects its commitment to developing vibrant destinations across the Kingdom. Among its flagship projects is Red Sea Mall in Jeddah, one of the region's leading retail and lifestyle destinations, welcoming millions of visitors annually and offering a diverse mix of retail, dining, and entertainment experiences.

Beyond Jeddah, RASM is involved in transformative developments including The Point in Abha, a contemporary mixed-use destination designed to support tourism and community life; Westin Resort – Abha, a luxury hospitality destination inspired by authentic Asiri architecture; and Al Mosa Avenue in Riyadh, a modern retail and lifestyle environment serving its surrounding urban community.

Through these projects, RASM continues to contribute to the evolution of Saudi Arabia's retail and mixed-use landscape while creating destinations designed to inspire people and deliver sustainable long-term value.

Red Sea Mall: Sea of Shopping

Red Sea Mall stands as one of Jeddah's most prominent retail and lifestyle destinations, offering a comprehensive experience that brings together shopping, dining, entertainment, hospitality, and business within one integrated environment. Located on King Abdulaziz Road overlooking the waterfront, the destination features more than 500 retail stores, a wide selection of restaurants and cafés, multiple entertainment zones, and extensive visitor facilities.

With a gross leasable area of 167,810 square meters, Red Sea Mall attracts millions of visitors annually and continues to serve as a benchmark for modern retail destinations in Saudi Arabia. Managed by RASM, the mall reflects a commitment to delivering vibrant, customer-focused environments that combine strong international brands, dynamic community programming, and high operational standards, reinforcing its position as a leading destination for residents and visitors alike.

RASM info@rasmsa.com

www.redseamall.com
info@redseamall.com
رد سي مول RED SEA MALL

2026 ANNUAL MEETING | RLC GLOBAL FORUM

FEBRUARY 3 - 4, 2026 / FAIRMONT RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA