

Social Commerce Growth and the Structural Transformation of the Consumer Decision Journey: A Literature Review and Theoretical Synthesis

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Abstract

Social commerce the integration of social networking platforms with electronic commerce infrastructure represents a fundamental transition in digital retail, shifting online shopping from search based, intentional purchasing to discovery driven, community mediated consumption. This literature review and research synthesis examines the global expansion of social commerce and evaluates how embedded social media features reconfigure consumer decision making mechanisms. Synthesizing core frameworks including the Stimulus Organism Response (S O R) theory, Social Support Theory, the Consumer Decision Journey (CDJ), and Swift Guanxi, this study analyzes the psychological, affective, and relational drivers of adoption. Global macroeconomic data projects the social commerce sector to grow from a 2025 baseline valuation of 1.48 to 1.65 trillion to multi trillion dollar thresholds by the early 2030s, propelled by Asia Pacific market dominance, live streaming innovations, and algorithmic personalization engines. The findings indicate that platform features compress the traditional sales funnel by substituting deliberate information search with observational learning, parasocial creator attachment, real time social proof, and embedded transactional checkouts. Consequently, high involvement evaluation pathways are frequently bypassed in favor of affect driven impulse buying or complex cross platform decision migrations. This paper unifies these dynamics into an integrated theoretical framework, offering insights for information systems research and strategic guidance for digital commerce practitioners.

1. Introduction

The digital commercial landscape is undergoing a structural paradigm shift driven by the convergence of Web 2.0 social architectures and electronic commerce transactional systems [1]. Historically, electronic commerce operated as an intentional, utility driven channel where consumers executed targeted search queries to fulfill established purchasing needs. In contrast, social commerce (s commerce) redefines retail as an interactive, relational, and experience centric process mediated by social media environments. By integrating product discovery, peer recommendations, live multimedia streams, and friction free payment settlement directly within social platforms, s commerce merges social engagement with commercial transaction[2].

This functional convergence has catalyzed global market growth across both developed and emerging digital economies. Valued between 1.48 trillion and 1.65 trillion globally in 2025, the social commerce

market is projected to reach multi trillion dollar valuations by the 2031–2034 period [3], expanding at compound annual growth rates (CAGRs) ranging from 21.5% to 37.4%. This acceleration is sustained by expanding mobile internet coverage, 5G infrastructure deployment, the commercialization of creator economies, and platform native checkout integrations that convert social engagement directly into monetizable gross merchandise value (GMV).

Geographically and structurally, this economic performance demonstrates distinct regional concentration and channel evolution. The Asia Pacific region dominates global social commerce volume, accounting for 68.5% to 72.3% of global revenue in 2025[4]. China represents the largest national social commerce market globally, generating 740.5 billion in 2025 [5], followed by the United States at 168.0 billion [6]. The global market trajectory exhibits a structural migration away from referral based models wherein social platforms serve merely as outbound traffic channels to external retail sites toward platform native transaction models that retain the complete customer lifecycle within integrated social applications.

Market Analytical Metric	2025 Baseline Market Size	Projected Future Valuation	Forecast Period	Projected CAGR (%)	Regional & Structural Highlights
Grand View Research	USD 1,484.5 Billion	USD 17,828.8 Billion	2026–2033	37.40%	Asia Pacific holds 72.3% revenue share; B2C leads with 60.3% share [6].
Ken Research	USD 1,485.0 Billion	USD 12,951.0 Billion	2026–2032	36.26%	China generates USD 740.5B; US generates USD 168.0B in 2025.
Mordor Intelligence	USD 1,630.0 Billion	USD 7,550.0 Billion	2026–2031	29.12%	Video commerce commands 43.22% share; Mobile devices account for 91.02%.
Market Data Forecast	USD 1,656.4 Billion	USD 15,713.0 Billion	2026–2034	28.40%	Asia Pacific commands 68.47% market share; AI & unified payments drive expansion.
IMARC Group	USD 1,511.7 Billion	USD 8,741.4 Billion	2026–2034	21.53%	Asia Pacific holds 70.0% share; Driven by mobile 5G adoption and creators.
The Business Research Co.	USD 872.7 Billion	USD 1,616.9 Billion	2026–2030	13.00%	US market accelerated by native shop tab launches and algorithmic curation.

The operational momentum of social commerce is rooted in a shift from transactional retail to socialized consumption experiences. Product categories characterized by high visual presentation, social expression, and creator demonstration such as Personal & Beauty Care and Fashion Apparel lead global sales volume[7]. Beauty and personal care represented the largest single product type share in 2025, while apparel demonstrates rapid growth due to its alignment with short form video feeds, live stream

try ons, and influencer affiliate marketing. Explaining how these feature environments fundamentally alter consumer decision making requires analyzing the behavioral, cognitive, and relational theories governing digital consumer actions.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Consumer Behavior in Social Commerce

Scholars examining consumer action within social commerce synthesize theories from environmental psychology, sociology, relationship marketing, and information systems [8]. These complementary theoretical lenses clarify how platform affordances transform into internal psychological states and downstream purchasing behaviors.

3. The Stimulus Organism Response Paradigm

The Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) framework serves as a central theoretical paradigm for social commerce literature [9]. Rooted in environmental psychology, SOR posits that environmental inputs (S) influence an individual's internal cognitive and affective evaluation (O), which subsequently executes a behavioral reaction (R) [10].

In social commerce, environmental stimuli (S) extend beyond traditional digital storefront cues or 4P marketing inputs. They encompass dynamic social media affordances, including algorithmic content feeds, real time live video, peer recommendations, verified user reviews, scarcity indicators, and creator entertainment value [11]. These environmental stimuli concurrently trigger complex internal organismic states (O):

Cognitive organismic processes involve perceived usefulness, review credibility, platform trust, and situational normality assessments. Affective organismic processes encompass emotional arousal, positive affect, parasocial attachment, a sense of virtual community belonging, and the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) [12]. Experiential organismic processing centers on the state of flow a psychological state of deep environmental immersion and focused engagement where temporal awareness decreases.

The interaction among these organismic states determines consumer behavioral responses (R), driving decisions such as immediate impulse purchasing, native content sharing, brand community participation, or cross platform decision migration.

4. Social Support Theory and Social Commerce Constructs

Social Support Theory asserts that individuals in digital networks fulfill psychological needs and mitigate uncertainty by exchanging informational and emotional resources with peers. In social commerce platforms, social technologies provide specific operational capabilities designated as Social Commerce Constructs (SCCs) [13].

These constructs comprise three primary platform features: Ratings and Reviews, which aggregate user feedback to reduce product quality uncertainty; Recommendations and Referrals, which leverage interpersonal social capital to validate purchase intentions; and Forums and Communities, which host peer to peer discussions, shared interests, and collective product evaluation.

These social commerce constructs facilitate two distinct forms of digital social support. Informational support consists of advice [14], recommendations, and product usage insights shared by peer networks, which directly reduce cognitive search costs and risk perception[15]. Emotional support involves expressions of empathy, care, encouragement, and community approval, which enhance psychological safety and elevate relationship quality with both the platform and merchant communities.

Perceived social support enhances relationship quality operationalized through commitment, satisfaction, and trust. In virtual retail environments where sensory product inspection is absent, interpersonal trust established through peer support exerts a stronger impact on consumer purchase intentions than organizational trust in the commercial enterprise alone.

5. Swift Guanxi and Relational Trust Dynamics

While established relational frameworks focus on long term trust accumulation, social commerce transactions frequently occur in volatile, fast paced environments requiring rapid decision making. To explain these short term interactions, scholars adapt relational network theory into the concept of *Swift Guanxi*[16]. Swift Guanxi describes the rapid formation of mutual understanding, psychological closeness, and transactional trust between buyers and sellers within social platforms, particularly during live stream broadcasts or conversational chat exchanges.

Swift Guanxi is established through antecedents including situational normality, interpersonal presence, communication responsiveness, and perceived host authentic familiarity[17]. When live stream sellers or micro merchants display high social presence, immediate responsiveness, and personal disclosure, consumers experience a rapid reduction in psychological distance. This fast relational bonding bypasses lengthy trust building cycles, directly increasing purchase intentions and word of mouth sharing behaviors.

6. The Integrated Social Commerce Theoretical Architecture

To consolidate these distinct theoretical perspectives, recent academic literature advances the comprehensive Social Commerce (SC) Framework [18]. This architecture synthesizes five interconnected dimensions that govern social commerce research and implementation:

The Social Dimension encompasses peer networks, community governance, user generated content co creation, and word of mouth dynamics. The Commerce Dimension incorporates business models (B2C, C2C, social reselling)[19-20], native checkouts, promotional strategies, and order fulfillment logistics. The Technology Dimension addresses Web 2.0/3.0 architectures, interactive live streaming affordances, mobile user interfaces, and artificial intelligence recommendation engines[21]. The Behavioral Dimension focuses on the consumer psychological journey, capturing initial attention, emotional arousal, cognitive trust, impulse buying, and post purchase community feedback. Finally, the Research Dimension specifies quantitative and qualitative methodologies such as Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS SEM), weight analyses, and meta analytic modeling—used to evaluate platform dynamics [22].

7. Structural Transformation of the Consumer Decision Journey

The integration of interactive social media features into digital commerce platforms fundamentally alters the traditional five stage Consumer Decision Journey (CDJ). The linear progression from Need Recognition to Information Search, Alternative Evaluation, Purchase Decision, and Post Purchase Behavior has evolved into an iterative, highly compressed, and non linear journey.

7.1. Stage by Stage Journey Reconfiguration

In traditional e commerce, Need Recognition stems primarily from internal physical depletion or intentional web search queries. In social commerce, need recognition is systematically activated through predictive algorithmic curation and immersive visual content streams. Social platforms analyze user engagement patterns such as view duration, interaction frequency, and gesture velocity to present highly

targeted, personalized product content within algorithmic feeds. Consumers do not actively initiate a product search; rather, latent consumer needs are activated during passive entertainment consumption. Need recognition shifts from intent based demand to serendipitous, discovery led shopping.

During the Information Search stage, consumers historically relied on merchant catalogs, official product descriptions, and formal corporate advertisements. Social commerce replaces merchant dominated information channels with peer driven crowdsourced validation and observational learning. Consumers gather information by monitoring real time viewer interactions, reading uncensored peer comment threads, and reviewing aggregated user ratings. Through observational learning, individuals evaluate product utility by watching the live purchasing behaviors and real time reactions of peer consumers, significantly reducing cognitive search effort.

The Alternative Evaluation stage transitions from structured attribute matrix comparisons (such as cross site feature and price matching) to parasocial trust alignment and community consensus heuristics. Endorsements from micro creators, live stream demonstrations, and user social proof act as cognitive shortcuts. The perceived authority and authenticity of the creator substitute for extensive feature by feature evaluation. Trust transfers from the abstract corporate brand to the human creator, compressing the evaluation phase into moments of emotional connection.

The Purchase Decision stage experiences structural funnel compression through platform affordances. Embedded shopping tags, native in app checkouts, one click digital wallet integrations, and live flash sales eliminate operational friction between product discovery and financial settlement. When combined with affective triggers such as scarcity counters, real time stock drops, and host promotions the transition from impulse urge to financial commitment occurs within seconds[23]. Rational, deliberative evaluation is frequently bypassed, producing high levels of impulse buying driven by emotional arousal and flow states.

The Post Purchase Behavior stage no longer marks the termination of the customer journey. Post purchase satisfaction or dissatisfaction feeds directly back into the platform's social content ecosystem. Consumers transform into active content co creators by posting unboxing videos, tagging product handles in aesthetic posts, writing detailed reviews, and participating in community Q&As. This user generated content serves as the environmental stimulus (S) that initiates discovery and need recognition for subsequent consumers, creating a continuous loop of social discovery and conversion.

Classical Commerce CDJ Stage	E Social Commerce Reconfigured CDJ Stage	Key Enabling Social Media Features	Primary Psychological & Relational Mechanism	Operational Impact on Consumer Journey
Need Recognition	Algorithmic Discovery	Personalization feeds, short form video recommendation algorithms.	Passive need activation, serendipitous latent interest.	Replaces intentional query search with entertainment led discovery.
Information Search	Crowdsourced Validation	Ratings and reviews, live viewer chat, Q&A forums.	Informational social support, real time observational learning.	Bypasses official merchant catalogs in favor of peer feedback.

Alternative Evaluation	Parasocial Alignment	Creator video demos, influencer live streams, tagged posts.	Parasocial attachment, social proof heuristics.	Replaces price/feature matrices with human mediated credibility.
Purchase Decision	Frictionless Conversion	Shoppable video tags, flash sale countdowns, native checkouts.	Flow state immersion, FOMO, emotional arousal.	Funnel compression; enables instant impulse buying.
Post Purchase	Value Co Creation	Video unboxings, tagged review posts, community forums.	Social identity signaling, virtual community belonging.	Generates continuous review loops that drive new user discovery.

8. The Risk Paradox and Cross Platform Migration Mechanics

Despite the growth of platform native shopping, empirical research reveals a complex behavioral phenomenon known as the *Social Commerce Risk Paradox*[24]. Studies examining cross platform consumer journeys demonstrate that high perceived risk on social media platforms stemming from data privacy concerns, merchant legitimacy doubts, and transaction security fears does not necessarily cause consumers to abandon their purchasing journey.

Instead, perceived risk on social platforms paradoxically accelerates *cross platform migration*. Gen Z and digitally native consumers frequently initiate product discovery (S), emotional engagement, and peer evaluation (O) within immersive social media channels such as TikTok, Instagram, or Xiaohongshu. However, when evaluating purchase risk, consumers migrate across digital environments to complete the transaction on established central e marketplaces (such as Amazon or Shopee) or official brand storefronts. Centralized e marketplaces provide buyer protection guarantees, established fulfillment tracking, and reliable refund infrastructure that offset social platform transaction risks. Consequently, social platforms serve as primary interest generation channels, while transactional completion depends on the total trust architecture across connected digital ecosystems.

9. Feature Level Affordances and Psychological Mechanisms

To understand how social platforms alter consumer behavior, specific technological affordances must be mapped to their underlying psychological constructs and empirical outcomes.

9.1.Video Commerce and Live Streaming Affordances

Live streaming and short form video commerce represent the fastest growing channels within global social commerce, capturing 43.22% of total market revenue [25]. Live video platforms combine real time visual demonstration, host banter, dynamic chat feeds, and time sensitive promotional cues.

High visual quality and host entertainment value generate a psychological state of flow, characterized by heightened sensory focus and enjoyment. In a flow state, consumers exhibit reduced price sensitivity and diminished analytical reflection, increasing purchase openness. Concurrent real time chat interactions and host shout outs foster strong social presence—the perception of warm, direct human contact within a

digital medium. Elevated social presence drives emotional arousal, triggering spontaneous impulse buying.

Furthermore, live stream flash sales and stock alerts activate scarcity cues. Covariance based structural equation modeling of live commerce consumers indicates that limited product quantity exerts a significant direct positive effect on impulse purchase behavior. Conversely, limited time countdowns primarily influence consumer attitude without directly driving instant purchase actions, demonstrating that volume scarcity is a stronger behavioral catalyst than temporal urgency.

9.2. Algorithmic Personalization Engines

Modern social media platforms use machine learning algorithms to curate individualized content feeds based on real time engagement telemetry. Algorithmic recommendation systems assess micro behaviors such as video rewatch loops, pause duration, comment interactions, and direct shares to infer latent consumer preferences [26].

This continuous personalization creates persona perception alignment, where consumers encounter products that match their lifestyle, aesthetic preferences, and subcultural identities. Algorithmic curation presents products seamlessly within organic entertainment feeds, lowering cognitive defense barriers. Consumers experience discovery as serendipitous personal alignment rather than commercial targeting, accelerating the shift from passive viewing to active purchase consideration.

9.3. Ratings, Reviews, and Peer Community Features

Platform features designed around user generated feedback function as fundamental trust building mechanisms in social commerce. Aggregate star ratings, unfiltered customer review threads, and user uploaded media reduce product quality uncertainty prior to purchase.

Peer reviews deliver informational social support by offering real world product usage evaluations, sizing feedback, and performance critiques [27]. This peer generated intelligence mitigates the sensory absence inherent in online shopping. Furthermore, high review volumes and active community discussions establish social proof, reassuring potential buyers through demonstrated peer consensus and lowering perceived risk.

9.4. Creator Economies and Parasocial Affordances

Digital creators and micro influencers serve as central relational intermediaries in social commerce ecosystems. Regular content publishing and personal disclosure foster parasocial interaction, where followers experience an asymmetric feeling of personal friendship and psychological connection with the creator.

When creators demonstrate products, endorsements benefit from emotional attachment and parasocial trust. Consumers often transfer trust from the creator directly to the recommended brand. This parasocial connection shifts consumer cognitive processing from central, systematic evaluation to peripheral, trust based heuristics. Consequently, follower purchase decisions are driven by personal alignment with the creator rather than objective product feature analysis.

9.5. Conversational Messaging and Chat Commerce

Messaging led social commerce relies on real time conversational channels—such as WhatsApp, WeChat, and direct messaging to guide consumers through discovery, inquiry, payment, and post purchase service [28].

Chat based interactions facilitate personalized, interactive selling journeys. Merchants and conversational AI bots can instantly answer product queries, send custom catalog links, and offer tailored promotional incentives. This two way communication builds Swift Guanxi by demonstrating

seller responsiveness and situational accessibility [27-28]. Conversational messaging reduces decision friction in high involvement, custom, or service intensive product categories, retaining buyers who might drop off in self service digital environments.

10. Regional Heterogeneity and Regulatory Compliance Dynamics

The evolution of social commerce displays operational heterogeneity shaped by regional digital infrastructure, cultural expectations, and national regulatory oversight.

In the Asia Pacific region, platform architecture favors super app models that integrate content, social networking, live streaming, and native digital payments into unified applications. China exemplifies this native ecosystem integration, where applications like WeChat, Douyin [28], and Xiaohongshu facilitate complete, enclosed consumer decision journeys. In contrast, emerging South Asian markets like India demonstrate a messaging led commerce model. Indian social commerce frequently initiates through discovery on visually oriented channels (Instagram, Facebook) but hands off execution to WhatsApp for personalized merchant interaction, catalog negotiation, and transaction fulfillment. This conversational format aligns with traditional retail preferences for assisted selling and personal merchant relationships.

In Western markets (North America and Western Europe), social commerce historically developed through referral based social advertising and creator affiliate storefronts. However, Western platforms are rapidly deploying platform native shops (such as TikTok Shop) to capture full conversion funnels.

Simultaneously, the scaling of social commerce has attracted increased regulatory scrutiny globally. Regulatory bodies such as the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) and Western fair trade authorities enforce strict disclosure mandates requiring creators to clearly label sponsored content, paid partnerships, and affiliate links. Non compliance and undisclosed commercial endorsements undermine consumer trust and create legal exposure for platforms [29].

Additionally, regulatory institutions and platform operators are implementing rigorous seller vetting procedures, anti counterfeiting tracking systems, and quality certification standards. In social commerce, where the gap between peer recommendation and checkout is minimal, counterfeit products or unfulfilled orders quickly undermine platform trust. Establishing robust buyer protection architectures, data privacy compliance, and transparent merchant vetting is essential for sustaining long term consumer participation.

11. Strategic Implications and Research Agenda

The transformation of consumer decision making in social commerce requires commercial enterprises to re align their digital strategies while opening new avenues for academic inquiry.

For commercial enterprises, digital retail strategies must adapt to discovery led shopping models. Brands should prioritize shoppable media formats, live streaming programs, and short form video feeds that capture attention within algorithmic recommendation systems. Marketing strategies should leverage Social Commerce Constructs by embedding authentic consumer reviews, peer referral incentives, and user generated media across all digital touchpoints. Partnering with creators who possess genuine parasocial trust within niche subcultures allows brands to access established trust networks, lowering customer acquisition costs. Furthermore, to manage the Social Commerce Risk Paradox , enterprises must ensure multi channel consistency, offering secure native checkouts alongside reliable order tracking, robust customer support, and seamless cross platform integration. Finally, commercial

operations must maintain compliance with evolving advertising disclosure regulations, data privacy mandates, and merchant authentication rules to preserve long term brand equity [30].

From an academic perspective, future social commerce research should address several critical theoretical domain expansions. Scholars should investigate the impact of autonomous AI recommendation agents and predictive algorithm curation on long term consumer agency[31], decision fatigue, and systemic overconsumption[32]. Further inquiry is needed to evaluate how spatial computing, virtual try ons, and Augmented Reality (AR) product visualizers interact with live social presence cues to alter risk perception and decision confidence. Researchers should also test the boundary conditions of relational paradigms like Swift Guanxi across diverse cultural and economic environments. Lastly, longitudinal empirical designs are needed to examine post purchase cognitive dissonance, product return rates, and long term brand loyalty resulting from affect driven social impulse purchases.

Conclusions

Social commerce represents a structural transformation in electronic commerce, shifting consumer behavior from deliberate, intent driven shopping to continuous, discovery based engagement. By integrating interactive social features—such as live streaming video, algorithmic personalization, peer feedback mechanisms, creator endorsements, and conversational messaging social platforms fundamentally reconfigure the Consumer Decision Journey.

Theoretical frameworks spanning Stimulus Organism Response, Social Support, and Swift Guanxi clarify how platform affordances operate as environmental stimuli that trigger affective arousal, flow immersion, parasocial connection, and swift trust¹. These psychological states compress traditional decision funnels, frequently transforming need recognition directly into affect driven impulse buying². As global social commerce expands toward multi trillion dollar valuations, sustained commercial leadership will depend on an enterprise's ability to combine engaging visual content with transparent trust architectures, regulatory compliance, and seamless cross platform execution

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