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Social Commerce and the Future of Online Shopping

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Abstract

Social commerce has emerged as a transformative force in the retail landscape, fundamentally reshaping how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products. This article examines the current state and future trajectory of social commerce, analysing the platforms, demographics, and behavioural dynamics driving its evolution. Drawing upon recent industry data and academic research, the study reveals that social commerce has matured from an experimental channel into a significant retail growth engine, with TikTok Shop projected to generate approximately $87 billion in global gross merchandise value by 2026. The analysis identifies key drivers including the collapse of content and commerce into unified experiences, the rise of creators as primary storefronts, and the growing influence of younger demographics who increasingly rely on social platforms for product discovery. However, significant challenges persist, particularly regarding consumer trust, influencer authenticity, and the complexities of measurement and attribution. The article also explores emerging frontiers including agentic AI commerce, the authenticity paradox in an AI-generated content landscape, and the integration of social commerce with broader omnichannel strategies. Practical implications for brands and retailers are discussed, emphasizing the need for dedicated social commerce strategies, authentic creator partnerships, and robust measurement frameworks.

Keywords: Social commerce, influencer marketing, TikTok Shop, consumer trust, agentic AI

1. Introduction

The boundary between social media and online shopping has effectively dissolved. In 2026, consumers no longer distinguish between scrolling through their feeds and browsing for products—these activities have become seamlessly integrated into a unified digital experience. This convergence, known as social commerce, represents one of the most significant transformations in retail since the advent of e-commerce itself.

Social commerce refers to the integration of e-commerce functionality directly into social media platforms, enabling consumers to discover, evaluate, and purchase products without ever leaving their favourite apps . Unlike traditional e-commerce, where shoppers arrive with pre-existing purchase intent, social commerce thrives on discovery, inspiration, and impulse. Users encounter products through creator content, algorithmically driven feeds, and livestream shopping events, then complete transactions within the same ecosystem.

The scale of this transformation is substantial. Industry forecasts project that TikTok Shop alone will generate approximately

$87 billion in global gross merchandise value (GMV) in 2026, representing year-over-year growth of roughly 56% . By 2030, ByteDance—TikTok's parent company—is projected to become the third-largest global retailer, commanding 14.6% of global e-commerce sales, trailing only Amazon's 15.9% . These figures signal that social commerce has crossed over from media channel to true retailer territory.

This article examines the current landscape of social commerce, the demographic and behavioural forces driving its adoption, the platforms competing for dominance, and the challenges that must be addressed for sustainable growth. It also explores emerging frontiers including agentic AI commerce and the evolving relationship between authenticity and technology in social shopping environments.

2. The Social Commerce Landscape in 2026

2.1 Defining Social Commerce

Social commerce represents an evolution of e-commerce enabled by Web 2.0 technologies and the proliferation of social media platforms . It combines social media engagement with commercial transactions, allowing consumers to interact, share experiences, and generate content while shopping . This distinguishes it fundamentally from traditional e-commerce, where individuals engage with online buying platforms independently and asocially.

The core characteristics that differentiate social commerce from conventional retail environments include interaction, collaboration, community, and social presence . Social interaction enables consumers to access information disseminated through peer networks and provides businesses with valuable customer feedback. Collaboration allows individuals to generate and share content through social networking services, enhancing co-creation between brands and consumers. Community facilitates environments where individuals engage with peers who share interests and recommendations. Social presence creates a sense of human connection within digital shopping experiences .

2.2 The Scale of Transformation

The numbers tell a compelling story of social commerce's maturation. Facebook maintains the largest base of social buyers through Marketplace and Shops, which enable businesses to create digital storefronts with in-app checkout capabilities . However, TikTok Shop is the fastest-growing platform, projected to reach $23.41 billion in US e-commerce sales in 2026—a 48% increase year-over-year. This would give TikTok Shop a larger US e-commerce business than Target, Costco, Best Buy, or Kroger .

During the 2025 Black Friday and Cyber Monday shopping period, TikTok Shop generated over $500 million in sales across four days, with a nearly 50% year-over-year increase in shoppers making purchases. Shoppers tuned into more than 760,000 livestream sessions, resulting in 1.6 billion views . These figures demonstrate that social commerce is not merely a fringe phenomenon but a mainstream shopping channel.

2.3 Platform Dynamics and Competition

Different platforms occupy distinct positions in the social commerce ecosystem. Facebook's strength lies in its massive user base and established Marketplace infrastructure. Instagram Shopping allows brands to tag products in posts, stories, and Reels, with luxury brands seeing 234% growth in Reels video views during the second quarter of 2025 .

TikTok's algorithm-driven feed excels at product discovery and impulse purchases, particularly for low-price, trend-driven items promoted by creators . The platform's restructuring—with US operations now majority-owned by American investors including Oracle, Silver Lake, and MGX—has brought greater operational stability for advertisers after years of ban-related uncertainty .

Importantly, social is no longer just about social media. As industry analysts note, social is best used as a starting point for experiences that span all other touchpoints—events, retail stores, out-of-home advertising, and real-world brand activations . The most sophisticated brands design for social first, then let what resonates travel everywhere else.

3. Demographic Drivers and Consumer Behaviour

3.1 Generational Shifts

Younger consumers are the primary drivers of social commerce adoption. Approximately one-third of adults aged 18 to 34 have made a purchase on social media, compared with 23% of 35- to 54-year-olds and 13% of adults between 55 and 65 . More strikingly, 73% of US Gen Z consumers identify social media as their main source for learning about new products . By contrast, 61% of Gen Xers still discover products while browsing in physical retail stores.

This generational divide has profound implications for brand strategy. Brands that ignore social platforms risk losing visibility during the critical discovery phase for younger demographics. The shift is not limited to discretionary categories either—grocery retailers including M&S, Lidl, and Sainsbury's arrived on TikTok Shop in 2025, demonstrating the expansion of social commerce into everyday essentials .

3.2 Category Performance

Certain product categories perform particularly well in social commerce environments. Beauty, cosmetics, and apparel dominate, driven by the enduring popularity of "get ready with me" videos and shopping haul content among younger audiences . The health and beauty sector continues its momentum, fuelled by the mainstreaming of wellness routines and increased adoption of at-home beauty technology. Products such as LED face masks and advanced skincare devices are projected to grow as consumers seek professional-grade results at home .

Men's skincare has emerged as a significant growth driver, with rising purchase frequency among male shoppers following brands such as The Ordinary and Kiehl's broadening the category and attracting new buyers . Interestingly, despite persistent economic pressures, products that consumers don't truly need are enjoying buoyant demand—what analysts describe as the widening gap between what consumers need and what they want to buy .

3.3 Determinants of Repurchase Intention

Understanding what drives repeat purchases in social commerce is critical for sustainable success. A systematic literature review examining repurchase intention in social commerce identified five primary determinants: trust, social influences, user experience, perceived value, and social commerce attributes .

Trust emerges as particularly crucial. Social commerce environments lack the established credibility of traditional retail channels, making trust-building essential for conversion and retention. Social influences—including recommendations from

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25 EP ECONOMIC PROSPERITY
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peers and creators—shape purchase decisions through network effects. User experience encompasses the seamlessness of discovery-to-purchase journeys. Perceived value reflects customers' assessment of benefits relative to costs. Social commerce attributes include the interactive, collaborative features that distinguish these platforms from conventional e-commerce .

4. The Creator Economy and Influencer Marketing

4.1 Creators as Storefronts

The rise of social commerce has fundamentally altered the role of content creators. In 2026, creators are not merely awareness generators but primary storefronts—trusted intermediaries who bridge the gap between brands and consumers . Consumers increasingly trust creator content and community recommendations more than brand-only messaging, and leading brands are now lifting social-first campaigns into connected TV and off-site media as reusable creative that drives directly back to retailer destinations .

The economic scale of the creator economy is substantial. Social media creator revenue is projected to increase by 16.2% in 2026, reaching $20.6 billion . Platforms like Later are processing $2.4 billion in annualized gross merchandise value through creator-led commerce .

4.2 Influencer Effectiveness and Challenges

Influencer marketing drives measurable sales, with 58% of consumers over 18 having purchased products because of an influencer endorsement . However, effectiveness depends critically on transparency and authenticity. Consumer trust remains a significant barrier: 26% of consumers distrust influencer marketing—more than double the 11% who distrust advertising overall—and 64% distrust influencers who fail to disclose their relationships with brands .

The most effective creator partnerships share common traits: clear disclosure of brand relationships, authentic advocacy from creators who genuinely use the products they promote, and robust measurement capabilities that attribute revenue to specific creator content at the SKU level . Yet research indicates that over 50% of marketers spend only 30 minutes or less vetting a single influencer, exposing brands to significant reputational risk .

4.3 Opinion Leaders and Investment Strategies

Academic research has examined the strategic role of opinion leaders in social commerce environments. Studies indicate that opinion leaders significantly boost platform profits and influence platforms' willingness to invest in user privacy protection services . In highly competitive markets with high investment sensitivity to experience services, platforms prefer to invest in both experience and privacy protection services. Opinion leaders play a crucial role in shaping these investment decisions across varying market conditions .

5. Trust, Authenticity, and the AI **Paradox**

5.1 The Authenticity Imperative

As AI-generated content floods social media, authenticity has become harder to fake—and more powerful than ever . Audiences are growing sceptical of anything too polished,

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craving human-made stories, real faces, and emotionally grounded perspectives they can trust. AI is not disappearing from marketing, but it is moving behind the scenes: scaling creativity, enabling personalisation, and fuelling speed without stealing the spotlight .

The paradox is that the more automated marketing becomes, the more brands must prove they are human. In a world of virtual voices and perfectly generated outputs, trust has become the only real differentiator . As trust in traditional authority figures—institutions, celebrities—erodes, consumers increasingly retreat to "people like me" . Research identifies "trusted," "authentic," and "created by someone like me" as the strongest drivers of influence in contemporary social commerce .

5.2 The Post-Trend Era

Related to the authenticity imperative is the emergence of what analysts call the "post-trend era." Virality is losing its shine. In an oversaturated feed culture, chasing every meme now signals short-term thinking rather than relevance . The brands that win are building ownable worlds—repeating ideas, recognisable voices, and coherent content systems that feel familiar rather than opportunistic. Social-first no longer means posting more; it means standing for something and showing up consistently. In a post-trend era, confidence beats speed .

5.3 Consumer Trust Gaps

Consumer trust remains a significant barrier to broader social commerce adoption. Beyond influencer scepticism, many younger consumers still prefer completing purchases through established retailers that handle transactions, shipping, and delivery rather than using in-app checkout tools . These trust gaps create opportunities for brands that prioritize transparency, authentic creator partnerships, and seamless fulfillment experiences .

Building customer confidence requires addressing fundamental concerns about security, privacy, and reliability. As industry observers note, shoppers demand more than fast checkout and convenience—they expect transparency, security, and frictionless experiences that don't involve trade-offs between safety and convenience .

6. Emerging Frontiers: Agentic AI and Beyond

6.1 Agentic AI Commerce

Perhaps the most transformative development on the horizon is the emergence of agentic AI commerce. Agentic AI refers to autonomous software agents capable of performing multi-step tasks without human intervention . These agents don't just answer questions—they execute purchases on behalf of consumers.

The implications for social commerce are profound. Just as brands optimized for search engines to help humans find them, they must now optimize for AI agents that browse and buy on behalf of humans . A consumer might instruct their personal AI assistant: "Find me a sustainable running shoe under $150 with high arch support and buy the one with the best reviews." The AI agent then crawls the web, reads specifications, verifies reviews, and executes the transaction .

Industry observers note that we are already seeing the early emergence of agentic commerce, and this trend will accelerate as consumers demand new levels of convenience . AI will play an increasingly vital role in helping users research and compare products, with test runs of autonomous transactions potentially appearing in the near future .

6.2 The Trust Gap in Agentic Commerce

However, agentic commerce faces a significant barrier: the "trust gap." Shoppers are hesitant to let AI handle their credit cards and personal financial information . Addressing this requires implementing agentic payment protocols—updating checkout systems to recognize and trust authorized bots rather than blocking them as fraudulent traffic. These protocols establish safe boundaries, such as preset spending limits or biometric approval triggers, allowing AI to execute purchases while humans retain control .

6.3 Zero-Click Commerce

Related to agentic AI is the trend toward zero-click commerce—transactions that happen in situ without users navigating to dedicated checkout pages . A user watching a TikTok video buys directly within the video player. A user chatting with a customer support agent completes a purchase within the chat interface. This requires checkout extensibility: distributing checkout APIs to where traffic already lives rather than driving traffic to a centralized checkout page .

7. Implications for Brands and Retailers

7.1 Strategic Recommendations

For brands navigating the social commerce landscape in 2026, several strategic imperatives emerge from the analysis.

First, social commerce requires dedicated strategy, not extension of traditional approaches. Brands must right-size social commerce within their portfolio planning, allocating budget, staffing, and strategic attention commensurate with its revenue potential . Social-driven GMV cannot live in a silo under "brand" or "social" if it is going to scale .

Second, creator partnerships must be treated as performance channels. Brands need to clarify where they must hold the line on brand messaging and claims, and where they are willing to give creators room to sell in their own authentic voice . These decisions shape who brands can work with and how quickly they can move.

Third, measurement capabilities are essential. Brands that cannot connect creator posts to revenue at the SKU level risk wasting budget. They must demand attribution capabilities from platform partners and build measurement into every brief .

Fourth, authenticity must be prioritized over polish. In an AI-flooded landscape, verified reviews, user-generated content, and transparent creator relationships are the only trust signals that matter . Brands should leverage AI not to fake content but to analyse and amplify authentic customer voices .

7.2 Product and Content Strategy

Success on platforms like TikTok Shop depends on deliberate choices across product selection, messaging, creator relationships, and paid advertising . Brands need to choose products that naturally fit into platform cultures, work with creators who can reach high-intent consumers, design sampling and content strategies for scale, and amplify winning content through paid promotion .

Content must be designed for social-first consumption, recognizing that short-form video, live shopping, and creator posts now do the work that used to happen across dozens of touchpoints . Education, social proof, and paths to purchase now live inside single scrolls.

8. Conclusion

Social commerce has matured from an experimental channel into a fundamental pillar of the retail ecosystem. The convergence of content and commerce, powered by platform innovation and shifting consumer behaviours, has created new dynamics that brands must navigate to remain competitive. TikTok Shop's rapid ascent demonstrates that social commerce is not merely incremental growth but transformative change—rewiring how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products.

Yet the path forward is not without challenges. Trust deficits, authenticity concerns, and measurement complexities require deliberate attention. The emergence of agentic AI commerce promises further transformation, potentially shifting optimization focus from human users to autonomous agents.

The brands that will thrive in this environment are those that recognize social commerce as distinct from traditional e-commerce and social media marketing. They will invest in dedicated strategies, authentic creator partnerships, robust measurement capabilities, and genuine human connection—even as AI increasingly operates behind the scenes. In a post-trend era where confidence beats speed and authenticity trumps polish, the fundamentals of trust and human connection remain the ultimate drivers of social commerce success.

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