

Algorithmic Recommendations, Content Marketing, and Consumer Purchasing Decisions on TikTok: The Mediating Role of Trust

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Abstract: Social commerce platforms have increasingly influenced how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products in digital environments. Among these platforms, TikTok has become a prominent channel for product promotion due to its algorithm-driven content distribution and highly interactive content ecosystem. Although prior studies have examined algorithmic recommendations and content marketing separately, limited attention has been paid to their combined influence on consumer purchasing decisions and the underlying role of trust. This study explores the relationships among algorithmic recommendation, content marketing, consumer trust, and purchasing decisions within the TikTok environment. Drawing upon the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, a research model was developed and empirically tested using data collected from 386 active TikTok users in Shanghai, China. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to examine the proposed relationships. The findings indicate that both algorithmic recommendation and content marketing positively affect consumer trust and purchasing decisions. Content marketing exerts a stronger influence on trust formation, suggesting that authenticity and content credibility remain critical factors in social commerce contexts. The analysis further demonstrates that consumer trust partially mediates the effects of algorithmic recommendation and content marketing on purchasing decisions. By examining technological and content-related drivers within a unified framework, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of consumer behavior on short-video platforms. The findings also provide practical insights for marketers seeking to enhance consumer engagement and purchasing outcomes through personalized recommendation strategies and trust-oriented content development.

Keywords: Algorithmic Recommendation; Consumer Trust; Content Marketing; Purchasing Decision; Social Commerce; TikTok.

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technologies has transformed consumer purchasing behavior and accelerated the growth of social commerce. As one of the fastest-growing social media platforms, TikTok has evolved beyond entertainment and become an important channel for product promotion and online shopping. Through its algorithm-driven content distribution system and highly interactive short-video format, TikTok significantly influences how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products (Montag et al., 2021).

A key feature of TikTok is its personalized recommendation system, which continuously analyzes user interactions to deliver tailored content. This recommendation mechanism enhances user engagement and increases exposure to products and brands. At the same time, content marketing has become a dominant strategy on the platform, with brands relying on influencers, product demonstrations, and storytelling-based videos to attract consumer attention and stimulate purchasing behavior (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

Previous studies have shown that algorithmic recommendations improve content relevance and user engagement (Chen et al., 2021; Jannach et al., 2021), while content marketing can strengthen consumer trust and purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Zhang et al., 2023). However, most existing studies have examined these factors independently, with limited attention given to their combined influence on consumer purchasing decisions within short-video social commerce environments.

In addition, consumer trust has been recognized as a critical factor affecting online purchasing behavior (Gefen et al., 2003; Shin, 2021). Despite its importance, limited empirical research has investigated how trust mediates the relationships between algorithmic recommendations, content marketing, and purchasing decisions on TikTok.

To address these gaps, this study examines the effects of algorithmic recommendation and content marketing on consumer purchasing decisions, while investigating the mediating role of consumer trust. Drawing upon the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, algorithmic recommendation and content marketing are conceptualized as external stimuli, consumer trust as the organismic state, and purchasing decision as the behavioral response. The study develops and empirically tests a research model using data collected from active TikTok users.

This study contributes to existing literature in several ways. First, it extends the application of the S–O–R framework to the context of short-video social commerce platforms, particularly TikTok. Second, it integrates technological factors (algorithmic recommendation) and marketing factors (content marketing) into a unified analytical framework. Third, it provides empirical evidence regarding the mediating role of consumer trust in transforming platform stimuli into purchasing behavior. Finally, the findings offer practical implications for platform operators, marketers, and businesses seeking to improve consumer engagement and purchase conversion within social commerce ecosystems.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

This study is grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). The S–O–R model suggests that environmental stimuli influence individuals' internal psychological states, which subsequently determine behavioral responses.

The framework has been widely applied in digital marketing and e-commerce research to explain consumer behavioral patterns (Eroglu et al., 2003; Rose et al., 2012). In social commerce environments, platform features and marketing activities serve as external stimuli, while consumers' cognitive and emotional evaluations represent organismic responses that ultimately affect purchasing behavior.

In the context of TikTok, algorithmic recommendations and content marketing are regarded as environmental stimuli. Consumer trust represents the internal psychological state, whereas consumer purchasing decisions constitute the final behavioral response. Therefore, the S–O–R framework provides a suitable theoretical foundation for examining the mechanisms through which TikTok influences consumer purchasing behavior.

2.2 Algorithmic Recommendations and Consumer Trust

The growing adoption of artificial intelligence technologies has transformed the way digital platforms interact with consumers. Recommendation algorithms are designed to identify user preferences and deliver personalized content that is expected to maximize engagement and satisfaction (Montag et al., 2021). Within social commerce environments, such systems not only facilitate information discovery but also influence consumers' perceptions of platform quality.

A substantial body of research suggests that personalization can strengthen consumer trust by improving content relevance and reducing information-search costs. For instance, Chen et al. (2021) reported that personalized recommendations enhance consumers' confidence in platform-generated information. Likewise, Jannach et al. (2021) argued that recommendation systems improve decision efficiency by narrowing product choices and minimizing cognitive overload.

However, the relationship between algorithmic recommendations and trust is not universally positive. Some scholars have noted that excessive personalization may generate concerns regarding privacy, surveillance, and algorithmic manipulation (Bol et al., 2020). In such cases, consumers may perceive recommendation systems as intrusive rather than helpful, resulting in reduced trust and platform engagement.

These mixed findings suggest that trust formation depends not only on personalization itself but also on how consumers interpret the relevance and fairness of algorithmic recommendations. Within TikTok's highly personalized environment, users frequently encounter content that closely matches their interests and behavioral patterns. Such experiences may reinforce perceptions of platform competence and reliability.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to recommendation technologies, empirical evidence concerning their influence on trust in short-video social commerce platforms remains limited. Therefore, further investigation is warranted.

H1: Algorithmic recommendation positively influences consumer trust.

2.3 Content Marketing and Consumer Trust

Content marketing refers to the creation and distribution of valuable, relevant, and engaging content designed to attract consumers and encourage long-term relationships (Pulizzi, 2012). On TikTok, content marketing frequently takes

the form of influencer endorsements, product reviews, storytelling videos, and branded entertainment content.

The effectiveness of content marketing is largely determined by perceived authenticity and credibility. Ashley and Tuten (2015) suggested that consumers respond more positively to creative and engaging content than to traditional advertising messages. Similarly, Lou and Yuan (2019) demonstrated that influencer-generated content significantly increases trust because consumers perceive influencers as more authentic and relatable than traditional advertisers.

Recent evidence further supports this relationship. Zhang et al. (2023) found that native content marketing on short-video platforms significantly improves consumer trust and purchase intention. In addition, Jang et al. (2023) reported that consumers develop stronger trust toward brands when marketing content appears authentic and aligns with their interests.

TikTok's content ecosystem encourages continuous interaction between consumers and content creators. Through repeated exposure to trustworthy influencers and authentic product demonstrations, consumers develop confidence in both the promoted products and the platform itself. As a result, content marketing is expected to positively influence consumer trust.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Content marketing positively influence consumer trust.

2.4 Consumer Trust and Purchasing Decisions

Trust is widely recognized as one of the most important determinants of online purchasing behavior. In digital environments, consumers often face uncertainty regarding product quality, seller credibility, and transaction security (Gefen et al., 2003).

Trust reduces perceived risk and enhances consumers' confidence in making purchasing decisions. Pavlou (2003) found that higher levels of trust significantly increase consumers' intentions to engage in online transactions. Similarly, Kim and Park (2013) reported that trust positively influences purchasing behavior in social commerce environments.

Within TikTok, users frequently rely on platform recommendations, influencer opinions, and user-generated content when evaluating products. Therefore, trust becomes a critical factor in determining whether consumers convert browsing activities into actual purchases.

Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Consumer trust positively influences consumer purchasing decisions.

2.5 Algorithmic Recommendations and Purchasing Decisions

Recommendation algorithms influence purchasing behavior by exposing consumers to products that match their interests and preferences. Through personalized content delivery, consumers encounter products more frequently, increasing awareness and purchase likelihood.

Gluck and Krueger (2020) argued that recommendation systems improve purchasing efficiency by reducing search costs and narrowing product choices. Likewise, Kumar et al. (2021) demonstrated that personalized recommendations significantly increase purchase intention and conversion rates in digital commerce environments.

Within TikTok's ecosystem, the "For You" page continuously delivers tailored content that may stimulate product discovery and impulse buying behavior. The repeated exposure generated by algorithmic recommendations can enhance familiarity and positively affect purchasing decisions.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Algorithmic recommendations positively influence consumer purchasing decisions.

2.6 Content Marketing and Purchasing Decisions

Content marketing plays an essential role in influencing consumer attitudes and purchasing behavior. Informative and entertaining content can increase consumer engagement while reducing resistance to advertising messages.

According to Evans et al. (2017), native advertising integrated into social media content significantly enhances consumer acceptance and brand favorability. Similarly, Liu et al. (2019) found that emotionally engaging content positively affects purchase intention by strengthening brand recall and emotional attachment.

Lou and Yuan (2019) further reported that influencer credibility and content quality significantly increase consumers' willingness to purchase promoted products. Because TikTok combines entertainment and commerce within a single platform, content marketing can directly influence consumers' purchasing decisions.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Content marketing positively influences consumer purchasing decisions.

2.7 The Mediating Role of Consumer Trust

Trust has frequently been identified as a mediating mechanism linking marketing activities to consumer behavioral outcomes. In online environments, trust enables consumers to transform positive perceptions into actual purchasing actions.

Gefen et al. (2003) argued that trust mediates the relationship between website characteristics and purchasing intentions. Similarly, Shin (2021) demonstrated that trust mediates the influence of personalization and platform quality on consumer behavior.

In the context of TikTok, both algorithmic recommendations and content marketing may influence purchasing decisions indirectly by enhancing consumers' trust toward the platform, content creators, and promoted products.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: Consumer trust mediates the relationship between algorithmic recommendations and consumer purchasing decisions.

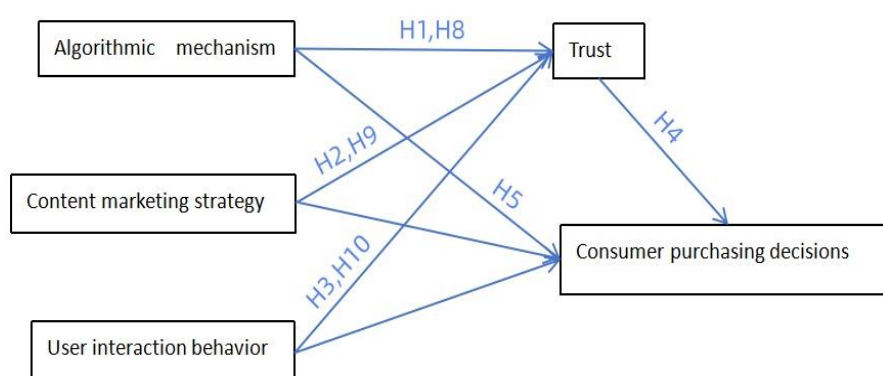
H7: Consumer trust mediates the relationship between content marketing and consumer purchasing decisions.

2.8 Research Framework

Based on the literature review and proposed hypotheses, the conceptual framework of this study consists of two independent variables (algorithmic recommendations and content marketing), one mediating variable (consumer trust), and one dependent variable (consumer purchasing decisions).

The framework proposes both direct effects and indirect effects through consumer trust, enabling a comprehensive examination of purchasing behavior within TikTok's social commerce environment.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the relationships among algorithmic recommendations, content marketing, consumer trust, and purchasing decisions on TikTok. A structured questionnaire was used to collect empirical data from active TikTok users.

Based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, algorithmic recommendations and content marketing were conceptualized as external stimuli, consumer trust as the organism, and consumer purchasing decisions as the behavioral response.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS was adopted to test the proposed hypotheses and mediation effects.

4.2 Sample and Data Collection

The target population consisted of TikTok users aged 18 years and above residing in Shanghai, China. Convenience sampling was adopted due to the accessibility of respondents through social media platforms.

A total of 412 questionnaires were collected. After removing incomplete responses, 386 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis, yielding a valid response rate of 93.69%.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 386)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	185	47.9
	Female	201	52.1
Age	18–25	133	34.5
	26–35	141	36.5
	36–45	71	18.4
	Above 45	41	10.6
Education	High School or Below	62	16.1
	Bachelor's Degree	210	54.4
	Master's Degree or Above	114	29.5
Monthly Income (RMB)	<5000	92	23.8
	5000–10000	170	44.0
	>10000	124	32.2

The results indicate that the majority of respondents were between 18 and 35 years old, representing the primary user group of TikTok. Furthermore, more than 80% of respondents possessed at least a bachelor's degree, indicating a relatively educated sample suitable for examining digital consumer behavior.

4.3 Measurement of Variables

All constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Table 2. Measurement Items

Construct	Code	Measurement Item
Algorithmic Recommendation	AR1	TikTok recommends content that matches my interests
	AR2	TikTok's recommendations are accurate
	AR3	TikTok helps me discover products I may like
Content Marketing	CM1	TikTok content is informative
	CM2	TikTok content is entertaining
	CM3	TikTok content appears authentic
Consumer Trust	CT1	I trust product information on TikTok
	CT2	TikTok creators are credible
	CT3	TikTok is a reliable platform for shopping
Purchasing Decision	PD1	I intend to buy products promoted on TikTok
	PD2	TikTok influences my purchasing decisions
	PD3	I am willing to purchase products recommended on TikTok

4.4 Reliability and Validity Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were employed to assess the reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model.

Table 3. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Algorithmic Recommendation	0.850	0.880	0.650
Content Marketing	0.870	0.900	0.680
Consumer Trust	0.890	0.920	0.700
Purchasing Decision	0.840	0.880	0.640

As shown in Table 3, all Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, all AVE values were above 0.50, indicating satisfactory convergent validity.

4.5 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix

Variable	AR	CM	CT	PD
AR	1.000			
CM	0.521**	1.000		
CT	0.604**	0.657**	1.000	
PD	0.589**	0.632**	0.701**	1.000

$p < 0.01$

The results reveal significant positive correlations among all constructs, providing preliminary support for the proposed hypotheses.

4.6 Common Method Bias Assessment

Because all data were collected through a self-reported questionnaire, the potential influence of common method bias (CMB) was examined using Harman's single-factor test.

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted by loading all measurement items into an unrotated factor solution. The results revealed that the first factor accounted for 34.72% of the total variance, which is below the recommended threshold of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 4. Harman's Single-Factor Test

Measure	Result
Total Variance Explained by First Factor	34.72%
Recommended Threshold	< 50%
Conclusion	No Significant Common Method Bias

Therefore, common method bias was not considered a serious concern in this study.

4.7 Discriminant Validity Assessment

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct should exceed its correlations with other constructs.

Table 5. Discriminant Validity

Construct	AR	CM	CT	PD
AR	0.806			
CM	0.521	0.825		
CT	0.604	0.657	0.837	
PD	0.589	0.632	0.701	0.800

The results indicate satisfactory discriminant validity because all diagonal values are greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations.

4.8 Measurement Model Evaluation

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed prior to hypothesis testing to evaluate the adequacy of the measurement model.

Table 6. Standardized Factor Loadings

Construct	Item	Loading
Algorithmic Recommendation	AR1	0.812
	AR2	0.836
	AR3	0.791
Content Marketing	CM1	0.844
	CM2	0.857
	CM3	0.809
Consumer Trust	CT1	0.861

Construct	Item	Loading
Purchasing Decision	CT2	0.842
	CT3	0.807
	PD1	0.801
	PD2	0.829
	PD3	0.792

All factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019), indicating satisfactory indicator reliability.

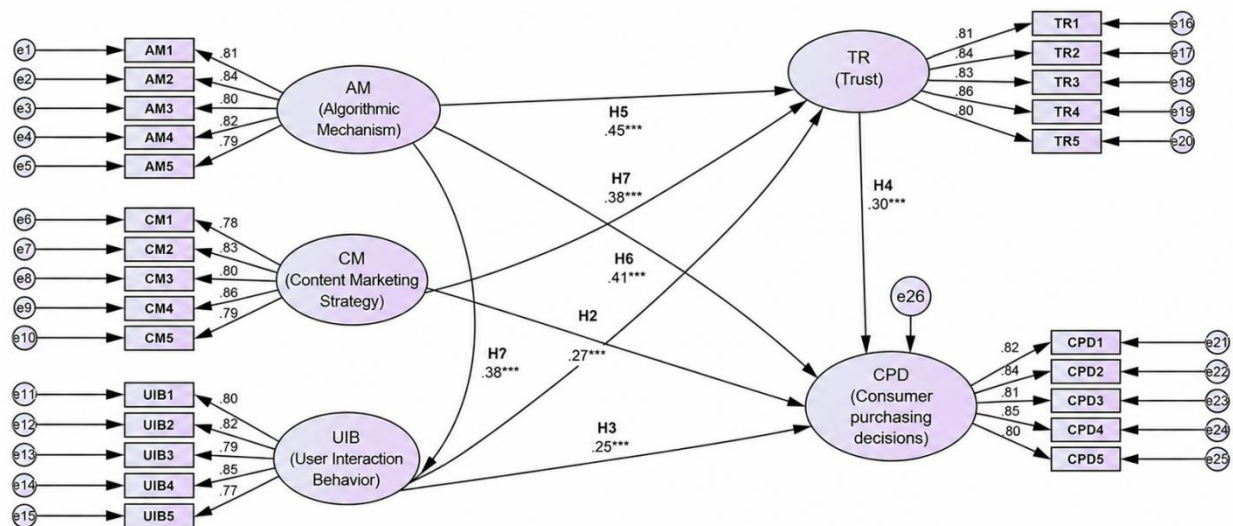
4.9 Structural Model Fit Assessment

The goodness-of-fit indices were examined to determine whether the proposed structural model adequately represented the observed data.

Table 7. Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Recommended Value	Obtained Value
χ^2/df	< 3.00	2.41
CFI	> 0.90	0.94
TLI	> 0.90	0.93
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.062
SRMR	< 0.08	0.057

The results demonstrate that all model fit indicators satisfy the recommended thresholds suggested by Hu and Bentler (1999), indicating that the proposed model provides an acceptable fit to the data.



Note: *** $p < .001$

V. CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

The rapid development of social commerce has significantly transformed consumer purchasing behavior, particularly on algorithm-driven platforms such as TikTok. This study investigated the effects of algorithmic recommendations and content marketing on consumer purchasing decisions, with consumer trust serving as a mediating variable.

Drawing upon the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework, this study proposed and tested a conceptual model using survey data collected from 386 TikTok users. The empirical findings demonstrated that both algorithmic recommendations and content marketing significantly influence consumer trust. Furthermore, consumer trust positively affects purchasing decisions and partially mediates the relationships between digital marketing factors and purchasing behavior.

Among the examined variables, content marketing exhibited the strongest impact on consumer trust, indicating that authenticity, entertainment value, and influencer credibility remain essential determinants of consumer confidence in social commerce environments. Although algorithmic recommendations facilitate product discovery and increase purchase opportunities, consumers ultimately rely on trust when making purchasing decisions.

Overall, the findings confirm that purchasing decisions on TikTok are shaped not only by technological personalization but also by consumers' psychological evaluations of content credibility and platform reliability.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The empirical results reveal to the existing literature in several important ways.

First, it extends the application of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework to the emerging social commerce environment of TikTok. While previous studies have primarily focused on traditional e-commerce platforms, this research demonstrates that the S-O-R framework remains effective in explaining consumer behavior within algorithm-driven short-video platforms.

Second, this study integrates algorithmic recommendations and content marketing into a unified research model. Previous research has frequently examined these variables separately. By analyzing their simultaneous effects, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of consumer purchasing behavior in digital commerce ecosystems.

Third, the findings highlight the critical mediating role of consumer trust. The results suggest that trust functions as a psychological mechanism through which technological and marketing stimuli influence consumer behavior. This finding enriches the literature on online trust and social commerce by providing empirical evidence from the TikTok context.

5.3 Managerial Implications

The findings offer several practical implications for marketers, businesses, and platform operators.

5.3.1 Implications for Marketers

Marketers should focus on developing authentic and engaging content rather than relying solely on promotional messages. The results indicate that content quality and credibility have a substantial influence on consumer trust and purchasing decisions.

Brands should collaborate with influencers who possess high credibility and strong audience relationships. Authentic product demonstrations and storytelling-based content can effectively enhance consumer trust and increase purchase conversion rates.

5.3.2 Implications for Platform Operators

TikTok and other social commerce platforms should continuously improve the accuracy and transparency of their recommendation systems. Consumers are more likely to trust platforms that consistently provide relevant and useful content.

Platform operators should also encourage high-quality content creation by implementing policies that reward authenticity and reduce misleading promotional practices. Such efforts can strengthen consumer trust and improve long-term platform sustainability.

5.3.3 Implications for Businesses

Businesses should adopt an integrated digital marketing strategy that combines algorithmic targeting with trust-building content. While recommendation algorithms can increase product exposure, authentic content remains essential for converting attention into purchasing behavior.

Companies should invest in customer relationship management and trust-building initiatives to maximize the effectiveness of social commerce marketing campaigns.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations.

First, the sample was limited to TikTok users in Shanghai, China. Therefore, the findings may not be fully generalizable to consumers in other regions or countries with different cultural and technological environments.

Second, this study employed a cross-sectional research design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships over time. Consumer perceptions and platform algorithms may evolve, potentially influencing purchasing behavior in different ways.

Third, the study focused primarily on algorithmic recommendations, content marketing, consumer trust, and purchasing decisions. Other factors such as perceived value, social influence, electronic word-of-mouth, and privacy

concerns were not included in the research model.

5.5 Future Research Directions

Future studies may expand this research in several directions.

First, researchers may conduct cross-country comparisons to examine whether cultural differences influence the effectiveness of algorithmic recommendations and content marketing.

Second, longitudinal studies could be implemented to investigate how consumer trust and purchasing behavior evolve over time as users gain experience with TikTok.

Third, future research may incorporate additional variables such as perceived usefulness, perceived enjoyment, influencer credibility, electronic word-of-mouth, and privacy concerns to develop a more comprehensive understanding of social commerce behavior.

Finally, comparative studies involving TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and Xiaohongshu could provide valuable insights into platform-specific mechanisms affecting consumer purchasing decisions.

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