

Purchase Intention in Chinese Social Commerce: Synthesis of Gamification, Technology Acceptance, and Cultural Dimensions

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Abstract

As the e-commerce landscape continues to evolve, social media platforms and online shopping are increasingly merging to keep up with trends and meet consumer demands. Given China's large population and high social media usage, it's essential to understand what drives consumer behavior. This knowledge enabled marketers to develop strategies that genuinely connect with Chinese shoppers, ultimately enhancing engagement and sales in the competitive world of social commerce. This narrative review synthesized evidence on how gamification, technological acceptance, and cultural values shaped purchase intentions in Chinese social commerce. The article linked platform design using gamification features to technology perceptions (usefulness, ease of use, and hedonic motivation), which generated psychological states (enjoyment and flow) that drive purchase intention. The findings showed that gamification, technological perceptions, and cultural factors positively influenced purchase intentions in social commerce. These elements boosted engagement, created enjoyable experiences, and aligned digital interactions with users' cultural expectations, enhancing purchase intentions. Consumer responses to gamification and hedonic features vary based on personal preferences, cultural backgrounds, and shopping motivations. Businesses must therefore develop adaptable strategies that accommodate diverse user behaviors. Practically, the findings can guide the design of gamified systems for s-commerce markets, ensuring they are inclusive and effective for Chinese culture. Additionally, it enhances the understanding of gamification and technological features by providing insights into their impact on purchase intentions in China's social commerce market.

Keywords: Purchase Intention; S-Commerce; Gamification; Technology Acceptance; Cultural Dimensions

Introduction

Over the past decade, online shopping in China has significantly increased. Between 2010 and 2020, e-commerce sales grew 34 times, far exceeding the global average growth of ninefold. In 2024, online retail sales across the country reached 15,522.5 billion yuan, marking a 7.2 percent increase from the previous year (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2025). As digital platforms continue to transform buying habits, marketers are increasingly leveraging social media to attract and retain customers. However, consumer behavior is evolving. The days of purely goal-driven shopping are gone; today's shoppers enjoy browsing, discovering new products, and engaging with real-time content (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019). This shift has resulted in more Chinese shoppers turning to social media for their purchases, which has blurred the lines between entertainment, social interaction, and shopping (Shi, 2023).

This evolution indicates a significant shift: social media is no longer merely a platform for chatting or sharing content; it has become a vital shopping hub (Alsaleh et al., 2019). Brands now actively monitor discussions, engage with user-generated content, and participate in conversations within forums and comment sections. These interactions are crucial in shaping consumers' buying decisions (Alsaleh et al., 2019; Voramontri & Klieb, 2019).

Social commerce significantly differs from traditional e-commerce by emphasizing interaction and discovery. As of December 2024, China boasted 974 million online shoppers, an increase of 59.47 million from 2023, representing 87.9% of internet users (Li, 2025).

The recent boom in online shopping has generated interest in innovative marketing strategies to enhance engagement and boost sales. Recent studies indicate that gamification, incorporating game-like elements, can strengthen emotional connections and promote user interaction (Radiliana & Atmaja, 2024). Social factors such as trust, peer recommendations, and community norms significantly influence purchasing decisions (Sheikh et al., 2019). Personal preferences, including a desire for fun and interactive experiences, also contribute to consumer behavior (Vinerean et al., 2022).

From a technological perspective, aspects like ease of use, perceived usefulness, and platform design can significantly impact buying choices (Hu & Zhu, 2022; Sohn & Kim, 2020). However, not all gamification efforts are equally effective; while some features can engage users,

others may not resonate (Tobon et al., 2020; Wu & Santana, 2022; Xi & Hamari, 2020). Although previous research has examined online shopping behavior, many studies have overlooked the unique dynamics of social commerce. In China, the effects of gamification appear mixed, likely due to cultural factors. Values such as collectivism, risk aversion, and power distance significantly influence consumer responses (Zyoud, 2023).

Recognizing the existing gap in research, scholars such as Dwivedi et al. (2023) emphasize the need for a deeper exploration into the influence of culture on e-commerce. This article addresses the impact of gamification, technological features, and cultural values on purchase intentions within China's social commerce market. It fills a gap in the literature by focusing specifically on social commerce (s-commerce) instead of treating e-commerce as a singular category. Furthermore, the study evaluates how gamification and technological features are used to enhance purchase intentions in the context of social commerce in China, as well as exploring how cultural context affects their effectiveness. Practically, the findings can guide the design of gamified systems for s-commerce markets, ensuring they are inclusive and effective for a culturally diverse audience. Additionally, it enhances the understanding of gamification and technological features by providing insights into their impact on purchase intentions in China's social commerce market.

Methodology

The study adopts a narrative literature review to identify the latest trends and research gaps regarding purchase intention towards Chinese social media. Additionally, the article proposes recommendations for future research in this area. The review integrates existing theoretical frameworks and empirical findings across three literature streams: technology acceptance, gamification, and cultural dimensions. Gamification was selected as the initial adoption driver to enhance consumers' continuous usage, due to the inherent entertainment nature of social media. Since social commerce is based on social media, the technology acceptance model remains dominant in explaining technology-driven consumer behavior. Besides, cultural values were included as they fundamentally shape how consumers perceive and interact with social commerce platforms. Relevant studies were identified from major academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) using keywords such as *“social commerce,”* *“gamification,”* *“technology acceptance,”* *“purchase intention,”* and *“cultural dimensions.”* Literature was

thematically grouped into three analytical clusters. Finally, the authors will provide a synthesis of the factors influencing purchase intention in S-Commerce in China.

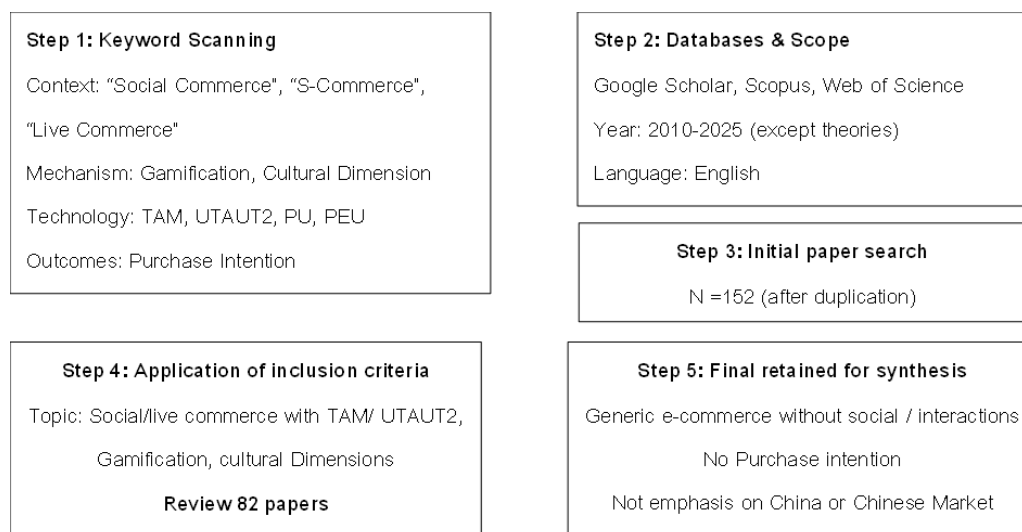


Figure 1 Flow chart for synthesis of the factors influencing purchase intention in S-Commerce in China

S-commerce

Social commerce (or s-commerce) revolutionizes online shopping by blending retail with social media. Platforms such as TikTok, WeChat, and Facebook have evolved beyond mere means of scrolling; they have transformed into digital marketplaces where users can discover, discuss, and purchase products without ever leaving the application (Xiang et al., 2016). What makes s-commerce different from traditional online shopping is the connections. Instead of static product pages, s-commerce thrives on entertainment, community, and real-time interaction—the elements that make social media so engaging (Attar et al., 2022; Jashari & Rustemi, 2017). A comparative analysis reveals that s-commerce can yield higher immediate conversion rates in contexts that leverage live interaction and promotions (Peng & Lu, 2024). Multiple studies demonstrate that s-commerce (especially livestreaming) strongly increases impulse purchases and hedonic spending via flow and social presence effects. These effects are robust in China, where live commerce has matured (Xiang et al., 2016). This model works exceptionally well in markets like China, where digital communities play a huge role in shaping buying decisions (Wang et al., 2022). When friends share recommendations, influencers demo products, or live-stream hosts answer real-time questions, shopping becomes social, interactive, and fun—not just transactional.

Technology Acceptance

Technology fundamentally shapes how consumers approach purchases in social commerce. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) offers a helpful way to examine Chinese consumers' engagement with these platforms, as its heart is two critical factors: whether users find the technology helpful (perceived usefulness) and easy to navigate (perceived ease of use). These perceptions directly impact people's willingness to adopt and use social commerce platforms (Mensah et al., 2023; Zhao & Zhu, 2023). Additionally, the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (UTAUT2) (Venkatesh et al., 2012) incorporates hedonic motivation, price value, and habit, which are especially relevant for social commerce.

Perceived Usefulness

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) highlights three key factors that determine whether people adopt new technologies: perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEU), and behavioral intention (Lin et al., 2017). Research shows people will keep using platforms they find genuinely helpful and straightforward to operate (Mensah et al., 2023). This is not new – Davis established in 1989 that technology adoption ultimately comes down to a simple cost–benefit analysis. If users decide a system is not worth the effort or does not provide real value, they will not use it.

Interestingly, PU affects consumer behavior differently across various digital shopping situations and life stages (Ruiz–Herrera et al., 2023; Yap et al., 2023). Whether talking about mobile banking, messaging apps, or e-commerce platforms, usefulness consistently emerges as the make–or–break factor for engagement (Faqih & Jaradat, 2015). Recent studies confirm that when users feel competent and find systems efficient, they are more likely to purchase (Dincer & Dincer, 2023; Hu & Zhu, 2022). This body of research makes one clear: for Chinese social commerce platforms to succeed, they must nail both usefulness and ease of use – these fundamentals drive both initial adoption and long–term usage (Copeland et al., 2023).

Perceived Ease of Use

Perceived ease of use (PEU), a fundamental element of TAM, describes how effortless users find a system to operate (Davis, 1989). This concept captures users' judgments about a technology's intuitiveness, navigability, and accessibility, as Dadras (2022) demonstrated. Ease of use matters because people carefully ration their limited effort across competing activities.

Burton–Jones and Hubona (2005) deepened our understanding by showing how learning curves and prior experience shape perceptions of usability. PEU measures how "at home" users

feel when using a platform. This becomes particularly important in social commerce during product discovery and purchasing. Research by Gao and Bai (2014) established that more straightforward navigation directly increases purchase likelihood, while Alalwan et al. (2017) verified PEU's consistent influence on usage intentions across various digital platforms.

Hedonic Motivations

Hedonic motivations are a dimension of the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (UTAUT2). Venkatesh, Thong, and Xu (2012) developed the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (UTAUT2) to better explain technology adoption in hedonic and social contexts and added consumer-specific constructs. UTAUT2 incorporates seven behavioral intention and usage predictors: performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, facilitation conditions, hedonic motivation, price value, and habit. Hedonic motivation represents the enjoyment and fun the user perceives using a particular solution (Venkatesh et al., 2012). Zhou et al. (2021) reported that hedonic motivation supports purchase intention in live e-commerce.

Gamification

Gamification, the art of adding game-like elements to non-game activities, has appeared more in marketing, education, and customer engagement. Incorporating rewards, challenges, and friendly competition transforms mundane tasks into exciting experiences that boost motivation and enjoyment (Castillo & Cano, 2024; Milanese et al., 2023).

Major brands like Nike and Coca-Cola have tapped into this power, using gamification to deepen customer relationships and spark meaningful interactions (De Canio et al., 2021; Tsou & Putra, 2023). However, here is the catch: gamification is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Its success depends entirely on how well it matches the audience's preferences and the brand's goals (Mok, 2024; Rialti et al., 2022). That is why innovative businesses carefully design their gamified systems to resonate with their specific customers (Behl et al., 2023; Jami Pour et al., 2021).

Gamification can be understood through three main components: affordances, behavioral outcomes, and psychological outcomes (Hamari et al., 2014). Affordances, known as extrinsic gamification, include the various features and mechanics that structure games. Behavioral outcomes refer to the behaviors and activities that are promoted by the gamification system. The explanation of gamification features is provided in Table 1 on the synthesis of the factors

influencing purchase intention in S-Commerce in China. Psychological outcomes encompass psychological experiences, such as enjoyment and engagement.

Perceived Enjoyment

Perceived enjoyment captures that fun, satisfying feeling people get when using entertaining digital platforms (Ha et al., 2007). In today's social commerce landscape, shopping apps are not just stores – they have become destinations for entertainment and connection, making enjoyment crucial to the experience (Alalwan et al., 2018).

This is where gamification shines. By adding playful elements like challenges, reward points, and interactive features, platforms create engaging environments that keep users returning (Radiliana & Atmaja, 2024; Xu et al., 2020). When these game-like touches hit the right psychological notes, they boost enjoyment, directly translating to higher purchase intent (Um, 2019).

Interestingly, tangible rewards like discounts work better at driving this enjoyment than more abstract motivators (Wu & Santana, 2022; Xi & Hamari, 2020). The prior research results show that enjoyment is a nice bonus and a key bridge between gamification features and buying decisions (Wu & Santana, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021).

Flow

Flow is the spot of complete focus, immersion, and being absorbed in an activity, even losing track of time (Lavoie & Main, 2024). This psychological state becomes a superpower in social commerce, directly boosting user satisfaction and purchasing decisions (Li et al., 2024; Li et al., 2025).

Social media platforms are practically designed to trigger flow states. Their engaging, interactive nature creates the perfect conditions for that "in the zone" feeling that transforms casual browsing into meaningful shopping experiences (Cuevas et al., 2021; Lee & Chen, 2010). Nowhere is this more evident than in China's social commerce boom, where flow states consistently lead to happier users and stronger buying intent.

What makes flow particularly powerful is how it teams up with social influence. That deep focus amplifies purchasing behavior when combined with peer recommendations or viral trends (Esteban-Millat et al., 2014; Kulviwat et al., 2016). Take livestream shopping: the flow state creates such intense focus and urgency that viewers often make impulse buys they do not even remember deciding on (Yin et al., 2023). At its core, flow turns shopping from a chore into an experience – the seamless, enjoyable engagement that keeps consumers returning for more.

Cultural Dimension

Culture plays a vital role in shaping how consumers perceive and engage with social commerce platforms. It influences various aspects, from digital engagement preferences to levels of trust and purchasing behaviors (Agag et al., 2024). What motivates Chinese e-commerce shoppers may not have the same effect in other regions. In China, the combination of integrated payment systems, platform ecosystems, and a mobile-first culture has created a favorable environment for the widespread growth of social commerce. Therefore, marketers must understand that identical online content can provoke significantly different responses depending on the cultural context (Yao et al., 2019), making it essential to adopt tailored marketing strategies.

Hofstede's cultural framework illustrates how national culture influences technology adoption and usage behaviors (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). In China, the collectivist orientation means that social circles play a significant role in shopping decisions (Hepple & Dennison, 2018). As a result, peer recommendations and community-driven content are particularly influential. Research indicates that shared values and social interactions serve as the foundation of consumer trust in this context (Lu et al., 2016).

Additionally, studies show that competitive elements are often more effective in individualistic cultures, where personal achievement and distinction are highly valued (Sailer & Homner, 2020). Conversely, overt competition may not resonate well within collectivist cultures, such as that of China. This cultural context helps explain why Chinese fan cultures, group purchasing, and platform features like group discounts can significantly enhance social mobilization for purchases in ways that traditional e-commerce often overlooks.

Cultural dimensions create distinct shopping behaviors: societies with high uncertainty avoidance require robust trust-building measures to overcome perceived online risks (Yin et al., 2019; Yusuf et al., 2022), while individualistic cultures prioritize convenience and personalization (Lim et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2013). Chinese consumers strongly rely on community endorsements, making socially integrated platforms more effective. While cultural frameworks remain valuable, globalization and digital connectivity gradually blend shopping behaviors across borders (Cleveland et al., 2016; Ozturk & Cavusgil, 2019), creating an evolving landscape for international marketers.

Since Hofstede's cultural dimensions are based on national culture, cultural values on the individual level may also affect behavioral intention. Schwartz's model (2012) identifies ten fundamental human values clustered into four higher-order dimensions: self-enhancement vs.

self-transcendence and openness to change vs. conservation. Benevolence and conformity orientations are particularly relevant in the context of Chinese social commerce (s-commerce). Chinese consumers often make purchase decisions regarding group harmony, cultural relational concepts (guanxi), and face (mianzi). A study examined the relationship between harmony and mutual understanding, which significantly predicts s-commerce (Mensah et al., 2023). Benevolence and conformity values predict preferences for collaborative gamification (e.g., group tasks, team rewards) and socially visible shopping (e.g., gifting during livestreams). These values align with findings that social influence and social presence are stronger drivers of purchase intention in Chinese s-commerce than in Western markets.

Discussion

Based on the findings in Table 2, this review synthesizes three main concepts: Technology Acceptance Model (TAM/UTAUT2), gamification, and cultural values to explain purchase intentions in Chinese social commerce. The literature indicates that platform features (such as embedded checkout, easy navigation, and gamified elements) shape users' perceptions of technology, including perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEU), and hedonic motivation. These perceptions lead to psychological states like enjoyment and flow, which influence purchasing behavior (Venkatesh et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2021; Copeland et al., 2023).

The synthesis table shows consistent positive correlations between PU/PEU and both purchase and repurchase intentions. These effects are amplified when friction is minimized, such as by providing in-app checkout options. Gamification elements, especially monetary rewards and status or leveling systems, further enhance enjoyment and social value, which in turn increases impulse buying and repurchase behavior. Competitive features generally boost engagement, although their impact on enjoyment can vary in collectivist contexts (Shao et al., 2019; Xi & Hamari, 2020; Chang & Yu, 2023; Gao & Zhao, 2023).

Flow, often characterized as cognitive absorption, is a strong predictor of impulse purchasing, particularly in livestream-based commerce, a prominent aspect of China's live-commerce landscape (Yin et al., 2023; Li et al., 2025). Lastly, cultural dimensions such as collectivism and uncertainty avoidance moderate these relationships. Team-based mechanics and public social cues typically outperform individual competition, while trust signaling often acts as a prerequisite for the benefits of gamification among consumers in high-uncertainty situations (Lim et al., 2004; Mensah et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2019; Yusuf et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Gamification, technological perceptions, and cultural factors positively influence purchase intentions in social commerce (s-commerce). These elements boost engagement, create enjoyable experiences, and align digital interactions with users' cultural expectations, enhancing purchase intentions. Consumer responses to gamification and hedonic features vary based on personal preferences, cultural backgrounds, and shopping motivations. Businesses must therefore develop adaptable strategies that accommodate diverse user behaviors.

The limitations of this study are its reliance on a narrative literature review, which may overlook emerging research and lack statistical validation of the conceptual model. Also, the study relies on the Hofstede cultural dimension. Future studies could utilize empirical methods such as large-scale surveys to test these relationships in a more systematic manner. Additionally, expanding research to include more cultural dimensions and regions would help determine whether these findings are applicable beyond China.

Table 1 Synthesis of the factors influencing purchase intention in S-Commerce in China

Construct	Finding	Sample & context	Method	Effect direction	Key sources
Technology Acceptance					
Perceived usefulness (PU)	When users judge the platform useful, their purchase intention rises, especially when checkout happens inside the app	China; Douyin/WeChat	Survey	Positive	Zhou et al. (2021), Copeland et al. (2023)
Perceived ease of use (PEU)	Better ease of use (clear menus, fast payment) leads to more first-time purchases and a greater chance of buying again.	China; s-commerce apps	Survey	Positive	Gao & Bai (2014), Copeland et al. (2023)
Hedonic motivation (UTAUT2)	When users feel hedonic value/fun, they're more likely to intend to purchase, particularly during livestream shopping.	China; livestream	Survey/ Experiment	Positive	Venkatesh et al. (2012), Zhou et al. (2021)

Construct	Finding	Sample & context	Method	Effect direction	Key sources
Gamification					
Rewards (monetary)	Monetary rewards (coupons, coins) make the experience more enjoyable, which in turn raises impulse buying and purchase intention. (Enjoyment is the mechanism.)	China; live events	Field/ Experiment	Positive (via enjoyment)	Shao et al. (2019), Gao & Zhao (2023)
Badges/Levels (non-monetary)	Badges/levels/status prompt more social interaction and recognition, which encourages coming back and buying again.	China; communities / game live broadcasting	Field/Survey	Positive (social value)	Chang & Yu, (2023), Zhang et al. (2025)
Competition	Competition mechanics (leaderboards) generally increase engagement and can improve purchase intention, but their enjoyment impact is inconsistent in collectivist cultures (solo competition may clash with norms).	China; team vs. solo mechanics	Experiment/ Survey	Positive	Chang & Yu, (2023), Xi & Hamari (2020)
Visibility effects (animations)	Visible animations/effects when someone buys create social presence (“others are here now”), which nudges repeat purchases.	China; livestream / game live broadcasting	Field	Positive	Zhang et al. (2025)
Perceived enjoyment	Interactive gamification (challenges, mini-games) elevates enjoyment, and that enjoyment is what drives higher purchase intention.	China; s-commerce	Survey/ Experiment	Positive (mediated)	Xu et al. (2020) Zhang et al. (2021)
Flow	When viewers enter flow (deep absorption) during livestreams, impulse purchases become more likely.	China; livestream	Survey/ Experiment	Positive	Yin et al. (2023), Li et al. (2025)

Construct	Finding	Sample & context	Method	Effect direction	Key sources
Cultural Dimensions					
Collectivism	In collectivist settings (e.g., China), team mechanics and group deals usually work better than individual competition increasing purchase intention.	China; group-buy / fan communities	Field/Survey	Positive (for team mechanics)	Mensah et al. (2023), Yao et al. (2019)
Uncertainty avoidance	For users high in uncertainty avoidance, clear trust cues (escrow, guarantees, return policies) must be present first; only then do gamification effects translate into higher purchase outcomes.	China; high-uncertainty avoidance segments	Survey/Field	Positive (conditional)	Lim et al. (2004), Yusuf et al. (2022)

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