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The Dual Role of Content Quality in TikTok's Social Commerce: Value Creation and Algorithmic Challenges

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Abstract. For informed choice, the quality of short-video commerce's product recommendations in its presentation to consumers is important, as it lets them see the product suggestions and click to buy while still watching the video. This paper is a qualitative study of TikTok, and it draws on peer-reviewed research and documentation from the platform. Content cues are linked with attention, trust, and action of consumers through stimulus-organism-response logic, and analysis is done on how recommendation incentives affect content creation. Search costs may be lowered, and product evaluation may be facilitated by relevant hooks, clear demonstrations, credible experience, and responsive interaction. But with the focus on retention and engagement, there's a risk of oversimplifying explanations or glossing over commercial influence, and there might be more buying and less comparing. Four responses are proposed: inserting 'hooks' with essential information, assessing authenticity by disclosure and demonstrable experience, offering the opportunity to learn more before paying, and assessing content for purchase and engagement. These are all proposals collectively that provide clear guidance for brands, creators, and platforms looking to enhance product fit and maintain consumer trust. The analysis is based on secondary evidence only and does not provide information on prevalence or causal effects of the identified risks. Testing of the proposed strategies, in the form of experiments and post-purchase follow-up, is required for the different product categories and markets.

Keywords: Short-Video Commerce, Content Quality, Algorithmic Recommendation, Impulse Buying, Social Commerce

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Short-video platforms have evolved from entertainment channels to infrastructures for product discovery, evaluation, and purchase. In 2021, TikTok claimed to have over a billion monthly users worldwide, which shows the magnitude to which short-form audio-visual messages can impact day-to-day decisions [1]. But unlike traditional e-commerce, a consumer is typically first exposed to a product on TikTok via algorithmic suggestions. It's for the ranks videos according to a number of signals like viewing completion, likes, shares, comments, captions, sounds, and hashtags – the

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completion of a longer video is explicitly mentioned as a relatively strong signal of interest [2]. This algorithmic logic has implications for content quality, which is not a matter of taste but a measure of how well it performs behaviorally, with user retention and interaction as proxies for relevance. On TikTok, content quality, thus, has two intertwined definitions. It means informational and creative aspects that can be perceived by the viewers, including relevance, clarity, credibility, entertainment, and completeness of demonstration. It is also used to describe behavioral performance indicators that the recommender system can capture, including product-link clicks, retention, rewatching, and interaction.

The relationship between content and consumption is further strengthened with the integration of TikTok Shop. The service went live in its entirety in the United States in September 2023 and features a Shop tab, affiliate content, livestream shopping, and fulfillment via the platform. Thus, a user can go from exposure to evaluation and even buying without leaving the app. Brands can save money on explaining the product when it is not understood, build trust by demonstrating products, and connect to consumers who have no initial purchase intent through quality content. But for users, it may be a compression in lieu of actively comparing and contrasting with quick, affective responses to creator influence or obvious social approval. An examination of the impact of content quality on consumer behavior is thus commercially relevant for the efficiency of campaigns and socially relevant for informed decision making, advertising transparency, and sustainable trust in social commerce.

1.2. Literature review

Short-video research links engagement to relevant information, content matching, storytelling, and emotion, with results varying across products and sellers [3, 4]. TikTok studies connect credibility and entertainment with purchase intention, including among Generation Z [5-7]. Trust helps explain these relationships [8]. Broader research identifies marketing cues, hedonic motives, mood, and self-control as influences on impulse buying [9, 10]. Research on short-form video platforms also links social proof cues, including likes and comments, with impulse buying [11]. An independent audit identifies viewing behavior, likes, and follows as influences on TikTok recommendations [12]. Disclosure research indicates that the effects of sponsorship transparency vary across audiences and outcomes [13, 14].

The studies reviewed here explain particular content attributes and immediate outcomes more clearly than the feedback loop linking recommendation signals, creator adaptation, and post-purchase experience. Engagement studies mainly examine visible interactions, while purchase-intention studies do not necessarily establish actual purchasing or satisfaction. This paper concentrates on the problems of attracting attention while giving information and the problems of perceived authenticity and commercial communication that is transparent. Regrets, returns, and trust erosion are all potential outcomes that need to be explored, but are not outcomes of the case.

1.3. Research framework

This case analysis is a qualitative approach that is based on stimulus-organism-response logic, in which the stimuli are the content cues, the psychological responses are attention and trust, and the outcomes are the actions of the consumer [8]. It explores the nature of these relationships and the effects of TikTok's recommendation and shopping features, along with potential after-purchase repercussions.

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2. Case description

Videos can be discovered with no previous follows or searches, as TikTok's For You feed utilizes viewing completion, interaction, captions, sounds, and hashtags to recommend videos [2]. TikTok Shop leveraged its US launch to introduce a combination of product linking, affiliate videos, livestream shopping, a marketplace tab, and fulfillment support, thus streamlining the path from viewing to purchasing. The relevant information, storytelling, and emotion are linked to engagement, credibility, and entertainment to purchase intention [3, 5]. However, focusing on visual signals can lead to over-ship and under-disclosure. Those satisfactions and dissatisfactions may then have an impact on creator credibility, brand attitudes, and platform use. The consumer value of each of the quality dimensions and the potential danger of focusing on the measurable proxy as the production target are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Content-quality dimensions, consumer mechanisms, and potential risks

Quality dimension	Observable content cue	Consumer mechanism	Risk if over-optimized
Hook relevance	Immediate problem, result, or comparison	Attention and need recognition	Clickbait and missing context
Information clarity	Parameters, suitability, price, and limits	Lower search cost and uncertainty	Oversimplification
Demonstration completeness	Process, evidence, and replicable results	Diagnostic trust	Selective or staged proof
Credibility and authenticity	Expertise, disclosure, balanced claims	Lower persuasion resistance	Performative authenticity
Audio-visual and interactive value	Pacing, story, comments, and replies	Enjoyment and social proof	Engagement without conversion

Note. The dimensions synthesize the mechanisms examined in Sections 1 and 3; the table is an analytical framework rather than platform-supplied performance data.

3. Analysis of value creation and value destruction mechanisms

3.1. Value creation through high-quality content

3.1.1. Algorithmic amplification of relevant hooks and cognitive efficiency

A good introduction can link an unrecognized need with a concrete use situation. A relevant hook isn't just "grabby"; it's also good at setting up a problem, result, or comparison so that viewers can quickly determine if the content will be relevant to them. Completion rates and interactions also play a role in the recommendations that TikTok makes, so if the opening is clear, it can increase the likelihood that beneficial content is shared with similar users [2, 12]. This approach is especially useful for low-involvement products, for which consumers don't make an active search. Large-scale short-video data is correlated with content matching and information relevance [3]. Finding benefit is the cost of discovery: the user gets a concise problem definition, a product option at their fingertips, and a small brand can get in front of an interested audience without requiring a full-blown following base.

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3.1.2. Diagnostic trust through visual demonstration

A brief video can turn claims into evidence. A problem-demonstration-result sequence can be a more effective way to express texture, scale, ease of use, setup steps, or before-and-after situations than a static product photo. Demonstrations improve diagnostic accuracy by making clear to consumers how a product works and its limitations, as well as explaining the procedure to be followed. This is because research shows that usefulness and ease of use are related to trust and buying intentions in the context of short videos [8]. Expertise also matters. TikTok research in the cosmetics industry identified a positive impact of influencers' expertise and credibility, and short-form advertising research linked credibility and expertise to consumer buying habits [5, 7]. So, high content value can not only create hype, but it can also minimize uncertainty.

3.1.3. Mitigating psychological resistance via authenticity and interaction

The visual language of TikTok is informal, and product communication can be interpersonal and not institutional. Real-life scenarios, spontaneous language, fair endorsements, and product exposure enable the viewer to deduce that a recommendation is based on experience and is not a recycled marketing statement. Shared value creation and purchase intention can be supported by perceived persona similarity [6]. Comments further this process by providing questions, objections, usage reports, and creator reply. These exchanges can serve as social proof and as a way to correct any missing information on the record publicly. Other studies indicate that Generation Z can be persuaded into impulsive buying through the relatable and product exposure of credible social-media personalities [9]. Authenticity and interaction lead to reduced defensive processing and a quick but evidence-based path to trust when managed responsibly.

3.2. Structural tensions and negative externalities

3.2.1. The attention-information disconnect in hook optimization

The first issue arises when retention is used as the sole measure of quality. Creators can present their surprising, conflicted, or extreme outcome first and delay the conditions, ingredients, risks, or limitations of a product. A viewer can stay on long enough to generate a positive completion signal, but not get the information required to make a good decision. If the attention signals are more dominant than the information content, then other similar videos might be expanded. However, platform description and independent recommendation audit identify behavioral signals relevance without identifying how often behavioral signals are mismatches of attention-to-information [2, 12]. In this situation, there's a disconnect: people are retained, but their understanding is incomplete. This is particularly problematic in high-involvement product categories like children's, electronics, supplements, and skin care, where suitability cannot be judged from a single dramatic outcome. In these instances, a strong hook may result in more clicks but lower-quality decisions.

3.2.2. The illusion of authenticity and trust erosion

Authenticity can become a "moldable" production style. Words that reveal a minor fault before a compliment or a knowingly flawed environment, or a 'friend-to-friend' style of speaking, can be written all over many campaigns. These cues first lower the persuasion resistance level, and then it becomes hard to distinguish them from the performance because of the repetition they face in the industry. It's not about the quality of production – it's about how to hide commercial intent behind a

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guise of independent experience. Trust is related to purchase intentions [8]. Studies about disclosure also reveal that the extent to which it improves credibility, engagement, and purchase intention will vary based on the nature of the disclosure strategy and whether the viewers opt to follow the influencer [13]. Using disclosure language that is clear can help people recognize advertising [14]. Such research does not determine how much disappointment or how much trust is lost on TikTok in the long term. Multiple times when the creator asserts something and the product ends up different from what they expected, it can lead to negative feedback, mistrust of subsequent recommendations, and spillover effects on the creator's brand and the platform. Quality then becomes "informativeness" that can be verified, but is actually a simulated social relationship.

3.2.3. Impulsive mispurchase driven by extreme information compression

Rewarding speed with a short video is good, but not everything can be judged at the same speed. A simple household tool or snack can be explained with a compact clip, but extended use, or compatibility information, contraindications, total costs, or service conditions may be necessary for a complex product. When those details are removed, it speeds up the process but pushes evaluation costs to the post-purchase phase. The consumer is entertained, emotionally stirred, socially affirmed, and invited to buy without being made to think of any other product. Marketing stimuli, hedonic motivation, mood, and self-control are important mechanisms in impulse buying as identified by meta-analytical evidence [10]. The social proof cues have been found to be correlated with impulse buying in the context of short-form video platforms [11]. In the context of short video livestream commerce, survey results show that consumer vulnerability is related to characteristics of streamers, time pressure, and livestream activity and impulse buying [15]. These findings offer more direct shopping evidence, though the associations found in surveys do not imply causal relationships, and results of livestreams cannot be directly applied to prerecorded TikTok videos. These shopping outcomes must be investigated, but such purchases might be more likely to be regretted, returned, or abandoned.

3.2.4. The misalignment of engagement metrics with commercial outcomes

A final issue comes when views, likes, and comments are regarded as an alternative to buying quality. If the product is not tightly coupled to the plot of entertainment, a lot of interaction can be created. On the other hand, an information-rich demonstration might create fewer comments and more qualified clicks to post-purchase dissatisfaction. Weibo data indicate that storytelling and emotionality are related to engagement, and Douyin data reveal that advertising performance depends on product price, seller exposure, and the type of advertising (in-feed vs. influence) [3, 4]. No single surface metric can measure all content. As a result, payments for reach encourage 'spectacle' and optimization for immediate engagement, harming content that encourages slower, more deliberate comparison. The apparent success of a viral video can then mask low product-link CTR, low conversion, low repeat purchase, and/or high product returns. Content quality should be assessed throughout the entire journey from attention through to the post-purchase experience.

3.3. Integrated interpretation

As seen in the TikTok case, the quality of the content is not solely about creative and technical aspects. It is a compromise between audience needs, creator decisions, recommender signals, and commerce goals. These mechanisms are helpful in making things more efficient and more

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trustworthy, but can create negative unmeasured returns if they replace value. Retention should signal relevance, not manipulation; experience in the customer journey should be evident, not hidden behind sponsored content; information should not be too complicated to comprehend due to brevity, and engagement should be included alongside, not as a substitute for, conversion and post-purchase metrics. The issue of central management is thus the metric alignment. In addition to short-term visibility, a quality system that includes audience attention and information completeness, qualified clicks, conversion, repeat purchase, complaints, and returns can be better for both commercial performance and for the consumer welfare than one that is short-term visibility dominated.

4. Managerial implications and corrective strategies

4.1. Couple hooks with decision-critical information

An interesting beginning should be directly followed by information that will enable viewers to form an opinion about the product. Creators can present a real-world problem, show their solution, and outline the limitations of the solution. A skin care, for instance, demonstration should determine the type of skin that it is meant for, together with any limitations, and an electronics video should list compatibility requirements before asking viewers to buy. This sequence maintains the hook's function of discovery and minimizes the distance between attention and understanding. Brands need to consider if the claim is substantiated by the proof and if any information is missing, which might alter the buying decision. Changes could be made on platforms to make the information fields easier to access alongside videos, such as category information. Completion may be a measure of engagement, as may be detail-page visits, but these should be interpreted with caution, as neither guarantees a viewer's understanding of the product. There might be some extra evidence, such as short comprehension checks and feedback on the lack of information.

4.2. Ground authenticity in disclosure and demonstrable experience

With regard to performative authenticity, the need is for more disclosure of product use and commercial ties. It's important to make paid partnerships, gifts, and affiliate incentives easily noticeable and explain that they are advertising near the recommendation [14]. Creators should also highlight the criteria for their assessment, such as how long they have used the product, under which conditions they used it, and any drawbacks they noticed. A follow-up review will show if an impression is sustained. These practices provide audiences with something on which to assess credibility other than an informal style or a familiar context. The disclosure effects are not the same for both followers and non-followers, and it is not possible to guarantee trust and sales through transparent communication [13]. Brands can facilitate this by permitting balanced reviews and not having promotional claims as independent experience. Platforms could provide a means to verify reports of misleading claims in a content review process, and creators could have a way to dispute inaccurate claims. When complaints are received for delivery or any other defect in the product, it is important to differentiate them from recommendation defect issues.

4.3. Provide a route to fuller information before checkout

When the suitability of the product cannot be explained in a short demonstration, short videos require a path towards fuller information. Creators can link the clip to an easily available product

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page, extended review, or directions page, which outlines specifications, overall price, and return policies. To allow interested viewers to continue to evaluate the product without having to re-synthesize a disjointed set of information. Substantive questions and well-supported replies can be pinned to address common uncertainties. On a platform, a reminder to check out before purchasing a product could be a valuable feature for complex or costly products, where it would be important to know, for example, that the device may not be compatible. A specific reminder is more helpful than a generic reminder that shows up on all purchases. These measures concern information compression; support for comparison at the point of decision. They should be evaluated not only on sales but on their understanding and product fit as well, since a decision to delay unsuitable purchases may be a sign of effective information.

4.4. Evaluate content by post-purchase indicators not engagement alone

Brands need to differentiate between the success of exposure and satisfaction with purchase. Views, likes, and comments indicate that the content got a reaction, but they don't necessarily mean that buyers chose the right product. It is therefore logical to think of product-link clicks and conversion in conjunction with subsequent complaints, returns caused by inaccurate information, and repeat purchasing, if applicable, in campaign evaluation. It's important to compare products across different price points, categories, and sellers' exposure and not assume that the same performance target is right for all campaigns. Creator contracts can be based on accurate demonstrations, transparency, and reach. Platforms could experiment to see if it helps distribute more informative content by including verified feedback. Negative signals should be interpreted with care, as they could be a single complaint or a coordinated report. A follow-up period of an appropriate length would provide a way to measure how well a campaign was successful at the time, and how satisfied it was in the longer term. These proposals are still interventions to test, not "solutions".

5. Conclusion

5.1. Key findings

This paper explores the relationship between TikTok's recommendation and shopping features and consumer decisions in relation to short videos. It is proposed that appropriate hooks can lower the costs of discovery, visual demonstrations can make attributes of the product easier to assess, and credible recommendations and responsive interaction can help build trust. These benefits are dependent on the content providing information that viewers can use. Dazzling presentation may occur with a lack of information, hidden commercial pressure, or even buying without sufficient comparison when attention is the sole focus of production. High engagement consequently provides an incomplete account of content quality. These tensions are met in the four recommendations: hooks to essential information, authenticity with verifiable experience, access to more detail, and evaluation of purchases beyond immediate conversion.

5.2. Research significance

The study applies stimulus-organism-response thinking in which content cues, psychological reactions, and consumer actions are all interrelated and where the influence of the recommendation incentives on the content cues is taken into account. Its contribution is an interpretation of the tension between quality as perceived by audiences and quality as inferred from observable behavior.

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For brands, it's an indication that can help them take a more careful stock of campaign results. For creators, it's an overview of how the transparent recommendations and product limitations are relevant even if a video is well-performing. For platforms, it's about determining where along the viewing and purchasing path there is room for improved clarity to make more informed decisions. The real life and social significance are the ability to make the product fit for purpose and keep consumers' confidence beyond the sale.

5.3. Limitations and future research

It is a paper based on secondary sources and does not observe TikTok users' understanding, purchases, or satisfaction. It is therefore not able to make causal inferences or to estimate the prevalence of the risks involved. The interpretation comes from evidence from Douyin, Weibo, Instagram, and even livestream commerce, yet with limitations to transfer to TikTok due to differences between platforms and markets. Interviews and surveys should be used with the behavioral evidence in future studies to differentiate between perceived quality and actual results. Experiments could include different disclosure formats, providing product information, and checkout reminders, and measure understanding and conversion. Researchers could study product fit, complaints, and changes in trust after buyers had purchased the product by following them. Cross-sectoral and cross-country comparisons would help to identify when the proposed strategies are most relevant.

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