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The Dilemma of Choice: How Social Media Commerce Shapes and Undermines Consumer Autonomy

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Abstract: Social media commerce has fundamentally reshaped consumer decision-making by seamlessly integrating shopping functionalities into platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and RedNote. These platforms offer highly engaging and interactive shopping experiences while leveraging persuasive design elements, algorithmic personalization, and influencer-driven marketing to subtly shape consumer behavior-frequently at the expense of genuine autonomy. This study investigates the mechanisms through which social media platforms influence purchasing decisions, emphasizing the tension between perceived autonomy and actual decision-making power. While algorithmically curated recommendations and targeted content can alleviate decision fatigue, streamline choice, and enhance efficiency for certain users, they often produce an illusion of choice, constraining critical self-reflection and the formation of authentic preferences. Moreover, social commerce practices-such as live-streaming promotions, curated reviews, and influencer endorsements-further reinforce behavioral guidance, sometimes without consumers' conscious awareness. The study concludes that social media commerce exerts a profound and multi-dimensional influence on consumer spending, decision-making processes, and self-perception. Drawing on these findings, the article offers ethical and practical recommendations for brands, platform designers, and consumers to cultivate a more transparent, responsible, and autonomy-preserving digital marketplace, balancing commercial innovation with consumer empowerment.

Keywords: social media commerce; consumer autonomy; algorithm recommendation; decision-making

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1. Introduction

With the rapid rise of social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and RedNote, social media commerce has emerged as a major driver of contemporary online consumption, offering unprecedented convenience and immediacy [1]. These platforms have introduced features such as shoppable posts, storefronts, and in-app checkout systems, effectively transforming social networks into fully integrated retail ecosystems. Users can seamlessly move from engaging with content-such as short videos or posts-to directly completing purchases, often within seconds. This seamless integration has not only strengthened the link between consumption and advertising but also reshaped the marketing landscape, creating innovative avenues for product discovery, evaluation, and purchasing that blur the line between social interaction and commercial activity [2].

Beyond convenience, social media commerce fundamentally alters consumers' decision-making processes. Platforms leverage sophisticated personalization algorithms that analyze browsing histories, engagement patterns, and social connections to actively target potential buyers [3]. Products no longer wait passively for consumers to seek them out; instead, the platform actively presents products to users in highly tailored ways. Such

algorithm-driven strategies have quickly become central to contemporary marketing approaches, effectively shifting decision-making authority from the consumer to the platform [4]. Social commerce thus functions as a strategic environment in which user attention, behavior, and personal data are continuously monitored and leveraged to guide purchasing decisions [5]. Consequently, consumers' choices—including the brands they select or even the decision to make a purchase at all—can be subtly shaped or nudged by algorithmically mediated interactions, often without conscious awareness.

While existing research has extensively explored psychological triggers of impulsive buying—such as social presence, emotional resonance, and peer influence—it has largely overlooked the implications of these mechanisms for consumer autonomy [6]. In other words, there is a gap in understanding how social media commerce may simultaneously empower and constrain consumer choice. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the following research questions:

a. Do consumers retain genuine autonomous decision-making power within social media commerce environments, or is autonomy increasingly illusory under algorithmic influence?

b. How do platforms construct an "illusion of choice," and how can these practices be critically evaluated from ethical, consumer-rights, and regulatory perspectives?

By investigating these questions, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the tension between perceived and actual autonomy in digital marketplaces, offering insights that are relevant to consumers, marketers, and policymakers alike. In doing so, it contributes to the growing literature on the ethical and psychological dimensions of social commerce, highlighting the need for greater transparency and responsible design in algorithm-driven platforms.

2. The Mechanics of Choice in Social Media Commerce

2.1. *The strategies designed by the social media platform to influence consumption choice*

In the fast-evolving world of e-commerce, effective UI/UX design plays a crucial role in driving digital marketing success by providing consumers with both functional and engaging experiences [7]. For instance, RedNote embeds a "one-click purchase" function within short-form videos, allowing users to navigate directly to the product page and complete purchases instantly. Similarly, Instagram leverages AR/VR try-on technologies, enabling users to virtually experience clothes or accessories [8]. Such immersive experiences, combined with well-designed interfaces and compelling content, enhance user interaction and increase the likelihood of purchase, reinforcing platform-driven decision-making and encouraging more buying behavior.

Beyond interface design, algorithmic systems further shape consumer behavior by controlling what users see and influencing their choices. Algorithms, through customized content delivery and curated recommendations, create the illusion of choice and significantly guide decision-making in digital environments [9]. Recommendations and search results are often determined by user behavior patterns and prior interactions, ensuring that content aligns with individual preferences. By analyzing the attributes of content users have previously engaged with, algorithms can suggest similar content that maximizes engagement and user satisfaction [10].

Consumer decisions are also shaped by social influence. Peer suggestions, shared experiences, and information from social media influencers can inform perceptions of products or services [11]. Platforms facilitate this influence by promoting informative content and encouraging brand engagement, which can enhance consumers' knowledge and motivate purchases through a sense of community belonging [12]. Social media influencers, in particular, have emerged as powerful tools for promoting products. Unlike traditional celebrities, they maintain closer interactions with their audiences through comments, live streaming, and continuous engagement, making their endorsements more persuasive and credible. Influencers often provide detailed demonstrations and explanations of products

in short-form videos, allowing consumers to understand features comprehensively and make informed purchasing decisions [13]. Collectively, these mechanisms intensify the platform's influence on consumer choice in the online marketplace.

2.2. The Utilization of Social Media Platforms by Brands

Brands can stimulate consumption by sharing fabricated reviews or curated user experiences, either from ordinary users or influencers [14]. Such practices subtly influence the purchasing decisions of social media users, often without their conscious awareness. Many low-quality products on platforms like Amazon have purchased fake reviews to inflate their ratings and perceived popularity, while similar tactics on social media can temporarily boost both average ratings and the number of reviews. Some companies even post fabricated consumer experiences on platforms like RedNote that appear authentic but are in fact scripted marketing content (Figure 1). For example, a post promoting dog food may include a direct purchase link and multiple hashtags, making it highly visible to other users and bloggers recommending the same product. These strategies effectively shape consumption intentions and purchasing behavior, and they have become an integral component of online brand marketing [15].

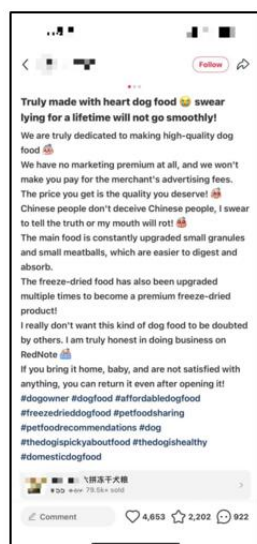


Figure 1. Screenshot of RedNote Post.

Live streaming is increasingly used by brands to boost customer engagement, promote products, facilitate transactions, and enhance the overall online shopping experience in social media commerce [16]. To create a more immersive and interactive shopping environment, live streamers often incorporate gamification elements such as lucky draws, flash sales, cash prize quizzes, and appearances by celebrity guests [17]. For example, limited-quantity promotions, where only a restricted number of products or services are offered at discounted prices, often prompt consumers to make emotionally driven purchase decisions, resulting in increased buying behavior [18]. In some cases, these strategies serve primarily as marketing tactics, creating a sense of urgency or scarcity even when products or discounts remain available after the live-stream event. While such practices can effectively boost sales, they may gradually erode consumer trust and undermine brand credibility.

3. The Erosion of Autonomy in Social Media Commerce

Consumers often perceive their purchasing habits as the result of independent choices, yet in reality, their autonomy is subtly undermined by market forces that shape

desires and preferences for new products and brands [19]. Actual autonomy and perceived autonomy coexist, but conflicts frequently arise: experimental marketing may enhance consumers' sense of empowerment without truly expanding the range of meaningful choices available to them. Algorithms employed by social media platforms to personalize content can further erode personal autonomy by limiting opportunities for critical self-reflection and exploration of diverse content.

Perceived autonomy often masks these underlying controls [20]. For example, the apparent freedom to compare prices may be constrained by algorithms that hide competing products or fail to present the most cost-effective options [21]. Similarly, the freedom to review products may be illusory if platforms selectively highlight positive comments while concealing unfavorable feedback. Even the act of choosing products can be influenced, as algorithmic curation and platform commission structures may prioritize high-profit but low-quality items [22]. Users repeatedly encounter products from the same brand and may believe that their selection reflects true autonomy, when in fact it is guided by a constructed sense of choice. In this way, perceived autonomy can obscure the ways in which consumer behavior is strategically shaped by platforms and brands.

3.1. Decision Fatigue and the Paradoxical Benefits of Social Media Commerce

Social media commerce, while often critiqued for its influence over consumer autonomy, can paradoxically offer certain benefits, particularly for individuals who struggle with complex decision-making [23]. Exercising will-through making choices, exerting self-control, or assuming responsibility-consumes mental resources, which can lead to decision fatigue. By streamlining the decision-making process, social media commerce systems can help mitigate this cognitive load. These platforms achieve this by limiting the sheer volume of information consumers must process and presenting a curated set of relevant options. This allows users to make purchasing decisions more efficiently, reducing the mental strain associated with evaluating numerous alternatives [24].

For example, recommendation algorithms on platforms like RedNote or TikTok can guide hesitant consumers, eliminating the need to browse through countless posts or compare dozens of nearly identical products. These algorithms often suggest brands and products aligned with users' previous behaviors and consumption habits, enabling transactions to be completed within seconds [25]. In doing so, the system not only facilitates convenience but also enhances the overall shopping experience, creating a sense of immediacy and satisfaction.

This functionality is particularly advantageous for frequent social media users, trend-seekers, and those who pursue a sense of belonging or social validation online. It also offers personalized convenience to consumers who may lack strong prior preferences or expertise in specific product categories [26]. By reducing complexity and cognitive burden, social media commerce can help consumers navigate vast digital marketplaces more effectively.

However, the impact of these systems on consumer autonomy is inherently dialectical. While they streamline decision-making and enhance efficiency, they simultaneously shape desires, reinforce behavioral patterns, and subtly constrain meaningful choice. Over time, reliance on algorithmically curated recommendations may narrow the scope of exploration and limit opportunities for independent judgment, even as consumers perceive themselves as making free choices. Consequently, understanding and engaging with these systems requires a rational and critical approach, recognizing both their utility in alleviating decision fatigue and their potential to influence preferences and autonomy.

3.2. Platform Interventions and the Gradual Loss of Self-Determination

The erosion of autonomous control over personal data can undermine autonomy-related capacities, including self-respect, self-esteem, and self-worth. When private data, such as transaction records and interest preferences, are used for targeted advertising,

platforms largely shape the environment users perceive, which can gradually make them question whether their choices genuinely reflect their own preferences. Continuous privacy intrusion may lead users to feel monitored, diminishing their confidence and self-esteem as personal boundaries are repeatedly eroded. When algorithms constantly intervene in decision-making with prompts like "you will like this," users may lose continuity and independence in their original thoughts, weakening their self-recognition and sense of value. For example, when a consumer searches for "pregnant women's skincare products," the platform may be flooded with related posts and advertisements, creating a perception that "my value has been reduced to purchasing power." Social media platforms often categorize users based on transaction data-such as labeling them as a "luxury consumption group"-which influences the content they see and the range of available products, gradually aligning their self-perception with the platform's profile. Additionally, features like "others also bought" amplify consumption pressure, potentially causing anxiety about self-worth. Collectively, these practices challenge the consistency of self-dominance and personal values in consumption decision-making.

The weakening of autonomy can be conceptualized through a four-quadrant model (Figure 2), which classifies consumers according to their autonomy (high or low) and urgency (high or low). This framework is adapted from the Covey Matrix, a time-management tool that prioritizes tasks based on importance and urgency. In this adaptation, the vertical axis represents autonomy to segment consumer groups more precisely, while the horizontal axis denotes the urgency of purchasing products.

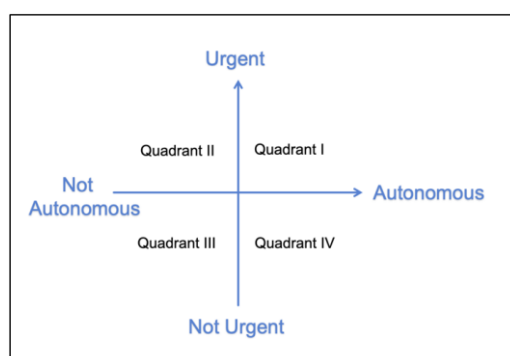


Figure 2. Four-quadrant Model.

Figure 2 illustrates the interaction between algorithmic influence and decision-making ability, highlighting how social media product promotions function for consumers with varying levels of autonomy and urgency, and revealing their differential impacts.

In the first quadrant (high autonomy, high urgency), consumers retain substantial control but may still be subtly guided under time pressure. For example, when booking a hotel or purchasing urgently needed medication, consumers have clear demands and standards, yet time constraints push them to rely on platform recommendations. These suggestions reduce search costs and enable rapid selection of suitable options. However, consumers often accept the "seemingly best" recommendations and may overlook cheaper or more appropriate alternatives, resulting in subtle manipulation.

The second quadrant (low autonomy, high urgency) reflects heightened vulnerability, as urgent needs amplify reliance on platform guidance. For instance, encountering limited-time offers or messages such as "only 1 item left" in live-streaming sessions can trigger impulsive decisions. Platforms can quickly satisfy these immediate needs, providing short-term satisfaction. Yet overdependence on such recommendations may lead consumers to purchase unnecessary products or overconsume, potentially causing regret or financial strain.

In the third quadrant (low autonomy, low urgency), long-term exposure to carefully curated content gradually shapes preferences, self-awareness, and perceived value, fostering unconscious conformity in purchasing. Consumers without strong purchase plans may passively engage with recommended links while browsing short videos, discovering "potential needs" and novel product experiences. Over time, habitual acceptance of platform choices can erode independent judgment, cultivating a tendency toward herd consumption.

The fourth quadrant (high autonomy, low urgency) represents consumers who can deliberate and resist suggestions. They have time to compare options and make considered decisions, for instance, when planning purchases of skincare products, electronics, or travel. While platforms provide abundant inspiration and references that facilitate rational decision-making, repeated exposure to targeted recommendations can subtly reshape consumers' perceptions of self-worth and personal needs. For example, continuous ads for "weight loss" or "whitening" products may gradually induce self-doubt.

Overall, this model demonstrates that autonomy is not static but fluctuates according to specific circumstances and platform pressures. It reveals how algorithmic filtering can gradually influence not only consumer choices but also self-awareness, confidence, and personal values, deepening our understanding of the subtle erosion of autonomy in platform-mediated consumption. Consequently, platforms affect not only purchasing behavior but also the construction of the self and the perception of personal autonomy, potentially leading to dissatisfaction with brands or even with the social media platforms themselves.

4. Discussion

This study highlights the complex and dual nature of social media commerce, revealing both its benefits and its potential to erode consumer autonomy. On one hand, platforms provide unprecedented convenience, personalization, and efficiency by integrating social interaction with shopping. Recommendation algorithms, curated content, and immersive features such as live streaming and shoppable posts streamline decision-making, alleviate cognitive load, and reduce decision fatigue. Consumers with limited prior knowledge, weak preferences, or decision-making difficulties may particularly benefit from these systems, as they allow rapid access to relevant products and create a more engaging shopping experience.

On the other hand, the findings indicate that social media commerce can subtly manipulate consumer behavior and shape desires in ways that challenge genuine autonomy. Algorithmic filtering, persuasive interface designs, and influencer-driven narratives construct an "illusion of choice," guiding users' decisions while fostering the perception of independent agency. The four-quadrant model presented in this study illustrates how autonomy is context-dependent and dynamically influenced by urgency and platform intervention. Even highly autonomous consumers are not immune to the gradual reshaping of preferences, self-perception, and personal values under sustained exposure to targeted recommendations.

These findings carry both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of autonomy in digital marketplaces by highlighting the distinction between perceived and actual decision-making power. It demonstrates that autonomy is not static but is influenced by algorithmic architectures, time pressure, and social cues. Practically, the results suggest that brands and platforms bear ethical responsibilities that extend beyond marketing effectiveness. Transparent algorithmic design, user-controlled personalization, and critical digital literacy programs can empower consumers to regain control over their choices and mitigate the subtle coercive effects of social commerce.

However, this study has certain limitations. First, while the analysis is grounded in theoretical frameworks and secondary evidence, empirical data from diverse consumer

populations would strengthen the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study primarily focuses on mainstream social media platforms and short-form content, leaving the effects of emerging platforms and new forms of digital interaction underexplored. Third, the research does not fully capture long-term psychological impacts, such as sustained changes in self-concept, decision-making habits, or financial behavior.

Future research should address these gaps by conducting longitudinal studies across diverse cultural and demographic contexts, examining how sustained exposure to algorithmically mediated content affects autonomy and self-perception over time. Additionally, exploring interventions-such as algorithmic transparency tools, personalized control features, or digital literacy initiatives-can provide practical solutions to balance commercial efficiency with respect for individual autonomy. Understanding how consumers navigate these complex ecosystems will be crucial for developing ethical and sustainable social media commerce practices.

5. Conclusion

Social media e-commerce represents a double-edged sword in today's consumption environment. On one hand, it offers unprecedented convenience, personalization, and efficiency by seamlessly integrating social interaction with shopping, thereby reducing decision fatigue and enhancing user engagement. On the other hand, it systematically undermines consumer autonomy through algorithmic filtering, persuasive design, and influencer-driven narratives, creating an illusion of choice. This study demonstrates that although consumers may perceive themselves as autonomous decision-makers, their choices are frequently unconsciously guided by platform architectures-and in some cases directly manipulated-to maximize engagement and conversion rates.

The erosion of autonomy extends beyond a mere limitation of options; it also affects the construction of self-identity and personal values. As platforms increasingly shape how consumers perceive themselves and the world around them, the boundary between genuine preferences and algorithmically reinforced desires becomes blurred. The four-quadrant model presented in this study highlights that autonomy is context-dependent and dynamically eroded under varying levels of urgency and platform influence, showing that even highly autonomous consumers are not immune to the gradual reshaping of their desires and self-perception.

From an ethical standpoint, these dynamics raise critical questions concerning transparency, consent, and the right to self-determination in digital marketplaces. Brands and platforms bear not only the responsibility of promoting business activities but also the heavier obligation of shaping consumer experiences and identities. Moving forward, it is essential to establish ethical design principles, including algorithmic transparency, user-controlled data settings, and programs fostering critical digital literacy, to empower consumers to regain control over their choices. Ultimately, the future of social media e-commerce should aim to balance technological innovation with people-oriented values, ensuring that convenience does not come at the expense of autonomy. Only through coordinated efforts among platforms, regulatory agencies, and consumers can we cultivate a digital market that is efficient, engaging, and-most importantly-respectful of individual autonomy and genuine choice.

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