



# Building Trust Through User-Generated Content: Parasocial Mechanisms, Quality Signals, and the Dynamics of Consumer Risk Perception

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## Abstract

*The article examines the complex problem of constructing consumer trust amid the accelerated growth of social commerce, where user-generated content (UGC) functions as a central mechanism for reducing information asymmetry. By synthesizing signaling theory, the parasocial interaction model, and the ADO conceptual framework (Antecedents–Decisions–Outcomes), the analysis clarifies the psychological and economic channels through which authentic messages and demonstrations of consumption experience reshape subjective uncertainty assessments and transform risk perception. The empirical component draws on recent statistical indicators and includes industry forecasts through 2030, linking micro-level trust effects to the macro-dynamics of platform-based commerce. Particular attention is given to the Piera case, illustrating the effectiveness of approaches grounded in granting creators substantive creative autonomy and embedding content practices natively within the platform's algorithmic logic. The findings point to a shift in the nature of trust in digital environments: it is derived less from institutional guarantees and more from emotional engagement and mechanisms of social validation.*

**Keywords:** Social Commerce, User-Generated Content (UGC), Parasocial Interaction, Signaling Theory, Risk Perception, Consumer Behavior, E-Commerce.

## INTRODUCTION

Global retail has entered a phase of structural rupture associated with the transition from classical e-commerce to the logic of “discovery commerce,” in which demand is shaped less through intentional search and more through algorithmically organized discovery of relevant offerings. At the center of this shift stands social commerce as an institutionalized buying-and-selling practice conducted directly within social media, without exiting into external retail circuits [1]. By 2025, the global social commerce segment reached a threshold of roughly USD 2 trillion, while the projected trajectory through 2030 is characterized by growth to USD 8.5 trillion with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of about 26.2% [2]. The TikTok platform-and especially the functional layer of TikTok Shop-has acted as an accelerator of these processes, producing a hybrid environment in which entertainment, communication, and transaction are technologically and behaviorally coupled.

A telling manifestation of this effect is the U.S. market: in 2024, TikTok Shop gross merchandise value (GMV) was estimated at approximately USD 9 billion [3]. This outcome is explained not only by improvements in recommendation

mechanisms demonstrating high personalization accuracy [4], but also by a change in the very architecture of trust. A brand's advertising message delivered in a traditional format loses persuasive force against a content ecosystem where the salient reference point becomes the experience of a “consumer who resembles me” and the influencer-mediator. For Generation Z and millennials, trust is more often associated with socially corroborated recommendations and observable usage practices than with official manufacturer declarations [5]. In 2025, most professional market participants report the advantage of user-generated content (UGC) over branded materials in engagement metrics; in particular, 93% of marketers point to its systematic superiority across key indicators [6].

Theoretically, the problem of trust in digital transactions is traditionally derived from information asymmetry in which the seller possesses more complete information about product characteristics than the buyer. In the absence of physical inspection, the consumer is compelled to rely on indirect markers of reliability and quality-signals that compensate for a deficit of verifiable information. In this respect, Michael Spence's signaling theory acquires renewed meaning in social commerce: the role of signals is performed

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not only by formal guarantees, but also by “behavioral” indicators within the platform environment—video reviews, the scale of audience response (likes, comments), the structure of discussion, and the perceived “honesty” of short video testimonies functioning as quasi-evidence of consumer experience [8].

A key psychological mediator strengthening the effect of signals is parasocial interaction (PSI)—a state in which the user develops an experience of personal closeness and stable “friendly” relations with a content creator [5]. This type of tie converts into a credit of trust that reduces the subjective probability of an unfavorable transaction outcome and, therefore, lowers perceived purchase risk. Using the Piera case—an approach described in expert perspectives on influencer marketing—the analysis demonstrates how brands designed from the outset for social ecosystems (native brands) capitalize on parasocial mechanisms and the platform logic of distribution to achieve accelerated growth [11].

Forecast contours for 2025–2026 point to a further complication of trust mechanisms due to the expanding role of artificial intelligence in content production, ranking, and moderation, as well as experimental adoption of blockchain instruments aimed at verifying the authenticity of UGC and the provenance of digital testimonies [8]. Taken together, these processes require a systematic theoretical description capable of explaining the dynamics of trust as a function of the attention economy, where affective engagement and social validation become equivalent to economic guarantees and, in many cases, begin to displace them.

**The purpose of the study** is to identify and subsequently describe mechanisms of consumer trust formation in social commerce through user-generated content (UGC), demonstrating how parasocial ties, quality signals, and platform-based social validation reduce information asymmetry and transform risk perception, thereby influencing purchase decisions.

**Academic novelty** lies in proposing, for the first time within this work, an integrative model that combines signaling theory and parasocial interaction within the ADO framework (Antecedents–Decisions–Outcomes), where UGC is operationalized as a “costly” (hard-to-imitate) quality signal, and PSI acts not as a background sympathy effect but as a functional mediator converting trust into transactional action through the reduction of perceived risk.

**The author’s hypothesis** is grounded in the assumption that UGC increases purchase probability primarily when it simultaneously activates a parasocial credit of trust toward the content creator and provides verifiable signals of experience/quality, thereby nonlinearly reducing financial, functional, and psychological risk and substituting part of institutional guarantees with mechanisms of emotional engagement and social validation.

Against this background, the methodological task of the study is not limited to describing the growth of social commerce or the increasing practical relevance of UGC. More importantly, it is necessary to specify the explanatory logic through which these phenomena can be understood at the level of consumer decision-making. The problem formulated above, namely, the erosion of institutional trust and the growing role of socially mediated and platform-native forms of validation, requires a theoretical model capable of explaining how consumers move from uncertainty to trust and from trust to transaction under conditions of incomplete information. For this reason, the analytical focus of the study is placed first on signaling theory, which clarifies how UGC functions as a set of observable cues reducing information asymmetry, and second on parasocial interaction, which explains how creator–audience closeness amplifies the persuasive force of those cues by lowering perceived risk. Only after these explanatory mechanisms are specified does the study proceed to the ADO framework, which is used not as an independent theory, but as a structuring device for organizing antecedents, mediating decision processes, and behavioral outcomes. Accordingly, the methodological section develops the theoretical basis directly from the research problem and then formalizes it into an integrative analytical framework for the subsequent interpretation of evidence.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study adopts an integrative review design that combines a systematic literature review with the analysis of secondary market data. The methodological objective is not merely to summarize prior findings, but to construct an explanatory model of how trust is formed in social commerce under conditions of information asymmetry and why user-generated content (UGC) is capable of reducing perceived risk and accelerating purchase decisions. Accordingly, the section is organized around the research problem itself: the consumer in platform-based commerce often cannot physically inspect the product, cannot fully verify seller reliability *ex ante*, and is therefore compelled to rely on indirect cues when making a purchase decision. The central methodological task is to identify which theoretical lenses best explain this transfer from uncertainty to trust and from trust to action.

Because the phenomenon under study is multidimensional and combines economic, communicative, and psychological processes, the research relies on a theory-driven qualitative synthesis rather than on meta-analysis. A quantitative aggregation of results was not selected because the available studies differ substantially in platform context, product categories, operational definitions of trust and authenticity, and measurement of outcomes such as engagement, purchase intention, and conversion [5, 8, 18]. Under such conditions, an interpretive synthesis is methodologically more appropriate, since it allows the researcher to preserve conceptual distinctions and to reconstruct the mechanism linking UGC, trust, and consumer behavior.

The empirical basis of the review includes two groups of materials. The first group consists of peer-reviewed academic publications indexed in international bibliographic and full-text resources, including Scopus, Web of Science, Springer, and IEEE. The second group consists of authoritative industry and analytical reports used to contextualize the macro-dynamics of social commerce and creator-led retail, including reports by Deloitte, CreatorIQ, Bazaarvoice, DHL eCommerce, PowerReviews, and Research and Markets [1, 2, 6, 7, 13, 21]. Academic studies were used primarily to identify and interpret explanatory mechanisms, while industry reports were used to assess the scale, speed, and commercial relevance of the observed processes. This combination makes it possible to triangulate evidence and reduce the risk of relying exclusively either on abstract conceptual studies or on commercially oriented descriptive analytics.

The source selection followed a problem-centered logic. At the identification stage, the search was oriented around combinations of the following key concepts: social commerce, user-generated content, parasocial interaction, signaling theory, trust, perceived risk, purchase intention, TikTok Shop, creator economy, and cross-border e-commerce. At the screening stage, titles, abstracts, keywords, and executive summaries were examined for direct relevance to the core research question. At the eligibility stage, sources were retained only if they contributed to at least one of the following analytical domains:

- 1) UGC as a credibility or quality cue;
- 2) parasocial mechanisms in influencer or creator-led communication;
- 3) trust formation and risk perception in social commerce;
- 4) platform-mediated purchasing behavior;
- 5) institutional or technological mechanisms that strengthen verification and reduce uncertainty in digital trade [5, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18].

Sources that discussed digital marketing in overly general terms without addressing trust, risk, UGC, or creator-mediated influence were excluded from the core analytical corpus. Priority was given to recent studies reflecting the fast-changing platform environment, while conceptually foundational formulations of asymmetry, signaling, and mediated social closeness were retained insofar as they were necessary for theoretical reconstruction.

The theoretical foundation of the study rests on two complementary explanatory perspectives: signaling theory and the parasocial interaction (PSI) model. These theories are not used as parallel summaries of the literature; rather, they perform different methodological functions in explaining the same phenomenon.

First, signaling theory is employed to explain the cognitive-economic side of trust formation under uncertainty. In

social commerce, consumers are exposed to a structural asymmetry of information: the seller or brand possesses more complete information about product quality, origin, and likely performance than the buyer, while the buyer must decide without direct inspection and often within a fast-moving, entertainment-driven interface [8, 9, 15]. In such conditions, observable cues operate as substitutes for unavailable direct knowledge. Within this study, UGC is treated not simply as “content,” but as a signal-bearing mechanism. More specifically, the analysis distinguishes four categories of signals.

The first category includes product-performance signals, such as demonstrations of use, before/after comparisons, unboxing sequences, application routines, and durability evidence. These signals help the consumer assess whether the product can perform the claimed function. The second category includes source-credibility signals, such as perceived honesty, competence, consistency of testimony, self-disclosure, and the creator’s visible familiarity with the product category. These cues shape judgments about whether the communicator is reliable. The third category includes social-validation signals, such as likes, comments, saves, reposts, discussion density, and the consistency of user responses across multiple pieces of content; these indicate whether the recommendation is socially corroborated rather than individually isolated. The fourth category includes institutional and procedural signals, such as return policies, platform guarantees, verification badges, seller responsiveness, and, in some categories, traceability technologies and digital authenticity markers [8, 9, 15]. The explanatory assumption derived from signaling theory is that the more observable, costly to falsify, and internally consistent these signals are, the lower the consumer’s expected verification costs and the lower the perceived financial and functional risk of purchase.

Second, the parasocial interaction model is used to explain why similar signals do not produce identical effects across creators and audiences. Signaling theory clarifies what cues reduce uncertainty, but it does not fully explain why some cues become especially persuasive when delivered by a specific content creator. This gap is addressed through PSI. In the context of social commerce, parasocial interaction is understood as a one-sided but psychologically meaningful experience of intimacy, familiarity, and relational continuity with a media figure or creator [5, 10, 14]. The consumer does not merely process information about the product; the consumer interprets that information through an already formed sense of “knowing” the source. Repeated exposure, conversational style, perceived similarity, emotional accessibility, attractiveness, and consistency of self-presentation strengthen this sense of closeness and turn the creator into a trusted interpretive shortcut.

Methodologically, PSI is treated in this study as a relational-

cognitive mediator between creator-related antecedents and decision outcomes. It explains how perceived authenticity and similarity are translated into trust, how trust reduces the subjective probability of disappointment, and how reduced psychological resistance shortens the path from attention to transaction [5, 10, 14]. In other words, PSI does not replace signaling theory; it specifies the affective mechanism through which signals become personally credible. The same demonstration of product use may function as a neutral informational cue when delivered by an unfamiliar actor, but as a high-impact trust cue when delivered by a creator with whom the audience has developed parasocial familiarity. This makes PSI especially important for explaining the reduction of psychological and social risk, that is, the fear of making a regrettable or socially disapproved choice.

The integration of these two perspectives is achieved through the ADO framework (Antecedents–Decisions–Outcomes), which in this study serves as an analytical organizing structure, not as a separate explanatory theory [5]. The role of ADO is to systematize how the constructs derived from signaling theory and PSI are positioned within the causal chain. In the Antecedents block, the study places creator characteristics (perceived authenticity, competence, similarity, attractiveness, charisma), content characteristics (demonstration, narrative format, disclosure style, visual realism), social-validation cues (comments, engagement, repetition), and platform/institutional conditions (return rules, verification, embedded shopping tools, traceability mechanisms). In the Decisions block, the study locates the mediating processes through which these antecedents affect consumer judgment: parasocial closeness, trust formation, perceived credibility, and assessment of financial, functional, psychological, and social risks. In the Outcomes block, the study captures behavioral consequences, including purchase intention, click-through to product pages, transaction completion, loyalty, and post-purchase engagement [5, 8, 18, 19].

Such use of ADO is methodologically important because it prevents theoretical conflation. Signaling theory explains the inferential logic of uncertainty reduction; PSI explains the relational mechanism of affective trust transfer; ADO makes it possible to place both within one coherent explanatory architecture. Thus, the study does not simply state that “UGC influences consumers,” but specifies through which antecedents, through which mediating decisions, and with which outcomes this influence unfolds.

The analytical procedure consisted of four sequential stages. First, the selected literature was examined to identify recurring explanations of trust formation in social commerce. Second, the materials were coded according to the main constructs relevant to the research problem: type of uncertainty, type of signal, degree of creator authenticity, presence of parasocial cues, form of perceived risk, and type

of behavioral outcome. Third, these coded constructs were mapped onto the ADO structure in order to reconstruct a theoretically coherent mechanism linking UGC to consumer action. Fourth, secondary market data and industry indicators were used to test the external plausibility and contemporary relevance of the reconstructed mechanism at the level of platform commerce dynamics [1, 6, 7, 13, 21].

Within this design, the Piera case is used as an illustrative analytical case, not as an independent empirical sample in the statistical sense. Its function is to demonstrate how the proposed theoretical model may be observed in a real brand strategy built natively for TikTok Shop. The case is interpreted through the previously established framework: creator autonomy is read as a condition for authenticity signals, platform-native content as a carrier of social validation, and repeated creator-audience exposure as a condition for parasocial trust accumulation. Accordingly, the case is not used to prove causality on its own, but to show the practical applicability of the conceptual model.

A final methodological principle concerns the distinction between micro-level mechanisms and macro-level context. The literature on trust, risk, and creator influence is used to explain micro-processes of decision-making, whereas market forecasts, platform statistics, and adoption trends are used only to establish the broader commercial environment in which these mechanisms become economically consequential. This distinction is necessary to avoid an unjustified transition from descriptive market growth to causal claims about consumer psychology.

The main limitations of the method stem from the use of secondary sources. Industry reports often rely on aggregated indicators and do not always disclose sample composition, normalization procedures, or modeling assumptions in sufficient detail. Academic studies, in turn, differ in operationalization, platform specificity, and cultural context, which limits strict comparability across findings. An additional limitation lies in the cross-national variability of legal regulation, consumer protection standards, and platform governance: the same trust signal may carry different evidentiary value in different markets. For this reason, conclusions are interpreted conservatively, with priority given to effects and relationships that are theoretically coherent and supported by more than one type of source [8; 9; 15]. The study therefore claims analytical generalization, not universal statistical generalization.

Taken together, this methodological design makes it possible to explain the observed transformation of trust in social commerce as a combined effect of informational signaling, parasocial mediation, and platform-specific decision architecture. UGC is therefore analyzed not as a peripheral communication artifact, but as the central medium through which quality cues, emotional proximity, and social validation

are translated into reduced risk and increased transaction readiness. ...

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The volume of the relevant market increased by approximately 69% over the year and, by 2025, reached more than USD 7.6 billion [7]. This dynamic indicates a reallocation of advertising budgets away from traditional mass-communication channels and toward content perceived as more credible and socially validated.

The observed shift toward user generated content can be explained through the combined logic of transaction cost reduction and signaling theory. In social commerce, consumers make decisions under conditions of incomplete information, since they cannot directly inspect the product, verify its performance in advance, or fully assess seller reliability before purchase. Under these conditions, user generated content acquires analytical significance because it supplies observable cues that partly compensate for this informational deficit. Demonstrations of actual use, visual confirmation of product attributes, narrative accounts of personal experience, and repeated exposure to comparable evaluations reduce the need for costly independent verification. Trust, therefore, is formed not abstractly, but through a sequence of judgments in which the consumer infers product quality and seller reliability from evidence embedded in the content itself.

From the standpoint of signaling theory, the persuasive force of user generated content lies in its ability to function as a relatively credible signal of both product performance and communicative good faith. Its effect is especially strong when the content contains markers that are difficult to imitate convincingly, including contextualized product use, consistency between verbal claims and visual demonstration, and convergence across multiple creators or users. In this sense, user generated content does not simply attract attention, it restructures the informational environment of the transaction. It makes expectations more predictable, lowers perceived functional and financial risk, and increases the probability that the consumer will interpret the seller as trustworthy. This mechanism is particularly relevant in platform commerce and in cross border transactions, where formal guarantees often appear distant or difficult to evaluate at the moment of choice.

The commercial relevance of this mechanism is reflected in changes in marketing resource allocation. As trust formation increasingly depends on socially validated and creator mediated communication, firms reallocate budgets toward actors capable of producing such signals at scale. This trend is visible in the institutionalization of the creator economy as an independent direction of marketing investment. According to Deloitte, in 2024 spending on content creators ranked first among social media marketing priorities and accounted

for an average of 24 percent of annual expenditures [13]. This indicator is methodologically important not as an isolated market fact, but as indirect empirical confirmation that firms recognize a structural change in the source of persuasive effectiveness. Expenditure follows the channel through which trust is now more efficiently produced, namely communication perceived as experiential, socially corroborated, and closer to ordinary user practice than conventional brand messaging.

Once trust formation is increasingly mediated by creators and user generated content, the legal dimension becomes a logical continuation of the analysis rather than a separate topic. The more strongly consumers rely on creator delivered signals when evaluating product quality and seller reliability, the greater the regulatory importance of transparency regarding the status and motivation of those signals. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission requires the disclosure of material connections between advertisers and endorsers and applies general truth in advertising standards to social media promotion [23]. This regulatory approach is significant because it recognizes that trust in such environments is formed through messages that may appear spontaneous or personal, while in fact being commercially motivated. The legal issue, therefore, is directly connected to the structure of trust in user generated content, since hidden sponsorship or misleading endorsement distorts the evidentiary value of the signal on which the consumer relies.

A comparable logic can be observed in the European Union. The development of platform commerce is accompanied by expanded transparency duties for online intermediaries, including obligations related to the identification of advertising content and the disclosure of parameters shaping its dissemination. Within this framework, the Digital Services Act is relevant because it seeks to reduce the manipulation of consumer choice in environments where recommendations circulate rapidly and where the credibility of information is often inferred from format, familiarity, and social approval rather than from formal verification [4, 9]. Thus, the tightening of regulatory requirements should be interpreted as an institutional response to the growing economic role of trust based signals in digital commerce. The stronger the influence of creator mediated and user validated communication on purchasing decisions, the more important it becomes to preserve the transparency conditions under which such trust can remain justified.

Table 1 is included to establish the macroeconomic context within which the analyzed trust mechanisms acquire practical significance. It demonstrates that the expansion of social commerce is not episodic, but structurally sustained, which justifies examining UGC, trust formation, and risk reduction not as marginal communication effects, but as economically consequential drivers of platform based consumption.

**Table 1.** Global social commerce market statistics and forecast (based on data from [1]).

Indicator	2023	2024	2025	2030 (forecast)	CAGR (%)
Global market size (USD bn)	1,300	1,600	2,000	8,500	26.2%
U.S. market size (USD bn)	82.2	97.1	114.7	188.3	10.4%
Social media users (bn)	4.8	5.0	5.2	5.8	-
Share of social commerce in e-commerce (%)	6.5%	7.8%	8.8%	12.0%+	-

The effectiveness of user-generated content is directly dependent on trust growth and an increased transition-to-purchase rate. According to 2024 data, up to 90% of consumers consider user-generated content the most significant factor influencing the decision to purchase a product [7]. This confirms that trust is formed not so much through “showcase” visualization as through social corroboration and demonstration of real consumption experience, which reduces uncertainty and increases predictability of transaction outcomes.

Brand practices that integrate user materials into digital storefronts are accompanied by a statistically noticeable increase in sales effectiveness: an increase of 74% in the purchase-completion indicator is recorded compared to the use of studio images alone [21, 22]. In applied terms, this effect is typically associated with placing reviews and buyer photo- and video-materials on product pages, which increases the evidentiary value of the information presented about product properties and facilitates matching expectations to actual characteristics.

From a theoretical and legal standpoint, the described correlation fits the logic of reducing information asymmetry: user-generated content functions as signals of good faith and quality, reducing verification costs and the risk of erroneous choice. At the same time, not only positive evaluations matter, but also the completeness of descriptions, the presence of comparable parameters, confirmation of actual product use, and consistency among user messages, which collectively increases the stability of trust as a legally meaningful condition for concluding a distance transaction.

Simultaneously, the importance of requirements for truthfulness and transparency in commercial communications grows: in social commerce, user reviews and recommendations can acquire the character of factual claims about a product, influencing the consumer’s formation of will. As a result, the role of procedures for verifying review

authenticity, distinguishing advertising from non-advertising messages, and preventing misleading practices increases, because manipulative construction of “social proof” directly affects consumer rights and may entail legal consequences for market participants.

Finally, the observed growth in transition-to-purchase rates when using user-generated content is also explained by organizational effects: such materials shorten the path from awareness to decision by providing relevant information at the point of choice-on the product page or within the purchase interface. As a result, not only immediate sales performance rises, but also the quality of subsequent consumer interaction: expectations become more realistic, which potentially reduces the frequency of claims and returns, strengthening the long-term sustainability of consumer relationships.

At this stage of the analysis, it becomes methodologically necessary to compare user-generated content with other dominant content formats present in platform commerce, since the effectiveness of UGC can only be interpreted correctly in relation to alternative persuasive models. For this reason, the comparison includes four content types that differ in source of communication, degree of perceived authenticity, production logic, and mechanism of influence on consumer judgment: official brand content as the baseline format of firm-controlled communication, macro-influencer advertising as a hybrid format combining paid endorsement with personal mediation, user-generated content as socially validated experiential communication, and AI-generated content as an emerging low-cost format whose persuasive capacity remains institutionally and behaviorally unstable. Accordingly, Table 2 is used not as an independent statistical dataset, but as a comparative analytical synthesis of recurring empirical patterns identified in the cited literature, allowing the place of UGC to be specified within the broader architecture of social commerce communication.

**Table 2.** Comparative effectiveness of content types on social media (compiled by the author based on [5-7; 11]).

Content type	Reported CTR / performance pattern	Production logic	Source of credibility	Main limitation noted in the literature
Official brand content	Baseline	Firm-controlled, professionally produced	Brand authority	Lower perceived authenticity, ad avoidance
Macro-influencer advertising	+12-18%	Paid creator endorsement	Creator reach and recognition	Weaker authenticity under overt commercialization
User-generated content (UGC)	Up to +400%	Consumer or creator-led experiential content	Social corroboration and visible use experience	Moderation and verification complexity
AI-generated content	Around +25%	Automated or semi-automated production	Format novelty and scalability	Ambiguous credibility, ethical and disclosure concerns

Parasocial interaction functions as a psychological mechanism linking the content creator and the consumer, generating a sense of personal closeness despite the absence of reciprocal communication. On TikTok, this mechanism is further strengthened by algorithmic personalization, since content is distributed not on the basis of stable social ties, but according to inferred user interests, thereby creating the impression that the creator’s message is unusually relevant to the viewer’s needs and life context [10]. As a result, the subjective significance of the creator’s communication increases, and users become more inclined to trust recommendations presented in this format.

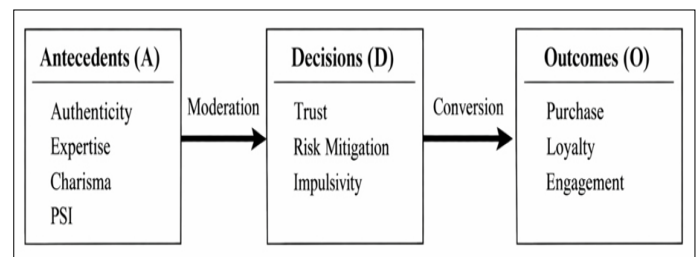
The reviewed studies show that parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between creator characteristics, including physical attractiveness, perceived competence, and psychological similarity, and such outcomes as loyalty and purchase intention [14]. When the creator is perceived as socially proximate or as “someone like me,” consumers are less likely to subject the message to intensive critical evaluation, and information processing more often shifts toward peripheral cues of credibility, including source liking, style of delivery, and emotional expressiveness [10]. Under these conditions, short and visually dense messages acquire greater persuasive force and more readily function as triggers of purchase decisions.

This effect is explainable through reduced cognitive costs of choice: the parasocial tie stabilizes expectations and decreases uncertainty, particularly in situations where the product cannot be verified prior to purchase. Under such conditions, trust in the author begins to perform the function of a “guaranteeing attribute,” substituting for detailed evaluation of product characteristics, comparison of alternatives, and analysis of transaction terms. At the same time, the stability of the author’s image becomes more important: discrepancies between proclaimed values and observable behavior can quickly destroy the formed tie and produce a reverse effect-distrust not only toward the advertised product, but also toward the brand using this channel of promotion.

The architecture of the digital environment also has organizational significance: algorithmic feeds optimized for attention retention contribute to repeated exposure to the same authors and thereby strengthen the “familiarity” effect as an independent trust factor. A cumulative mechanism emerges in which frequency and sequencing of exposure increase subjective closeness, and subjective closeness increases readiness to accept recommendations without extensive verification. For this reason, parasocial interaction should be treated not as a purely psychological phenomenon, but as the result of the combined action of author characteristics, presentation format, and algorithmically managed repeatability of communication [10].

The legal dimension of this mechanism follows from the increased persuasive force of creator mediated communication under conditions of parasocial trust. When consumers perceive a creator as familiar, sincere, or socially proximate, they may be less likely to distinguish clearly between personal recommendation and commercial endorsement, or may underestimate the persuasive intent embedded in the message. Under such conditions, requirements concerning the identifiability of advertising, the truthfulness of product representations, and the prohibition of misleading practices become especially important, because the effectiveness of the message is strengthened by the audience’s pre existing trust in the source. In this sense, transparency in commercial communication and the verifiability of key product claims function not as external legal additions, but as institutional safeguards necessary for preserving the reliability of trust based market interaction and for protecting consumers in digital commerce.

For the purposes of this study, findings from the reviewed literature on parasocial interaction are interpreted as evidence of a recurring explanatory pattern rather than as proof of a single uniform causal mechanism. The literature consistently shows that perceived closeness to a creator is associated with higher trust, stronger loyalty, and greater purchase intention, but the magnitude and direction of these effects depend on platform context, audience characteristics, content format, and product category [14]. Accordingly, parasocial interaction is treated here as a theoretically relevant mediating mechanism within the broader architecture of trust formation in social commerce. The analytical relationships discussed above are systematized in Figure 1, which presents the ADO based structural model linking antecedents of trust formation, intermediate decision processes, and behavioral outcomes in social commerce.



**Figure 1.** Structural model of UGC influence on consumer behavior (ADO Framework) (compiled by the author based on [5]).

In social commerce, the consumer encounters several interrelated dimensions of risk: financial risk (the probability of losing money), functional risk (the product failing to match claimed characteristics), and psychological risk (post-purchase regret and reduced satisfaction) [8]. Under these conditions, user-generated content acquires the meaning of a social signal that reduces uncertainty: demonstrations of real-use experience, comparability of “before/after” outcomes, and the documentation of package contents

and performance characteristics reduce the likelihood of erroneous choice and thereby weaken the above risk types.

From the standpoint of signaling theory, the effectiveness of such signals is determined by their “cost,” meaning the difficulty of imitation and the costs of falsification [8]. Text reviews, in the absence of adequate procedures for confirming provenance, may be perceived as vulnerable to bad-faith fabrication, whereas video materials that capture actual product use over time possess higher evidentiary persuasiveness: they contain multiple verifiable cues (use context, product response to exposure, comparability of claimed and observed parameters), which increases the perceived credibility of the message.

In the context of social commerce, technological and procedural verification signals are most relevant in product categories commonly promoted through creator content and associated with elevated functional risk, including cosmetics, skincare, and other experience dependent goods. Here, consumer trust is formed through a combination of social validation and confirmability: user generated content provides experiential evidence, whereas verification mechanisms related to authenticity, origin, or product consistency strengthen confidence that the item shown in the content corresponds to the item actually offered for purchase. In this sense, such signals are directly linked to trust formation in social commerce, because they complement parasocial and social proof based trust with a more formal layer of reliability, thereby reducing uncertainty and perceived functional risk [8].

The practical relevance of verification and traceability signals is especially evident in product categories commonly promoted through social commerce and associated with elevated information asymmetry, including cosmetics, skincare, and other experience dependent goods. In such categories, consumers often cannot assess authenticity,

composition, or expected performance before purchase, which increases the importance of supplementary cues confirming that the product shown in creator content corresponds to the product actually offered for sale. For this reason, the trust building role of user generated content is strengthened when experiential signals are complemented by procedural signals that improve the verifiability of product related claims.

At the same time, the effectiveness of such signals depends not only on their presence, but also on the institutional conditions that make them interpretable and reliable. Standardized product information, consistent disclosure practices, transparent return conditions, and platform level procedures for verifying reviews and seller claims all contribute to a more stable informational environment in which consumers can interpret available cues with greater confidence. In this context, user generated content performs the function of social validation, while verification and traceability mechanisms perform the function of procedural reinforcement. Together, these elements reduce perceived uncertainty and strengthen trust by lowering the probability that the consumer will infer quality from misleading or weakly substantiated signals.

In order to support this argument, the study draws on selected empirical results reported in the reviewed literature on social advertising and social commerce. The purpose of Table 3 is not to present an original statistical model developed by the author, but to systematize representative findings from prior empirical studies showing that trust repeatedly appears as a significant mediating variable between communication exposure and consumer responses, including satisfaction and purchase intention [17, 19, 20]. Table 3 systematizes selected empirical findings from the reviewed literature that illustrate the mediating role of trust in the relationship between social advertising exposure and consumer outcomes.

**Table 3.** Selected empirical findings on the mediating role of trust in social advertising and social commerce, based on [17, 19, 20].

Hypothesized relationship	Path coefficient ( $\beta$ )	t-statistic	P-value	Result
Advertising → Consumer behavior	0.677	7.454	<0.001	Supported
Advertising → Trust	0.203	3.845	<0.001	Supported
Trust → Satisfaction	0.852	9.120	<0.001	High significance
Trust → Purchase intention	0.863	10.450	<0.001	Decisive factor

Having established, on the basis of the reviewed empirical literature, that trust functions as a central mediator between communication exposure and consumer response, the analysis now turns to the Pitera case in order to examine how this mechanism operates in a concrete TikTok Shop native brand context. To move from generalized findings in the literature to their platform specific manifestation, the analysis now turns to the Pitera case as an illustrative empirical example of trust formation within the TikTok ecosystem. In

methodological terms, this case is not treated as an original primary dataset or as a statistically representative sample, but as an analytically significant example reconstructed from secondary industry materials and expert commentary [11]. Its function in the present study is to demonstrate how the mechanisms identified above, namely signaling, parasocial trust, social validation, and reduced perceived risk, are operationalized in an actual TikTok Shop native brand strategy.

The Piera case reflects a shift from one sided brand communication toward a model of coordinated co creation with digital content authors, in which persuasive effectiveness depends less on direct message control and more on the credibility of mediated product experience. In this configuration, commercial performance is linked to the brand's ability to embed itself in creator led communication that is perceived by the audience as familiar, platform native, and experientially grounded. What is empirically important here is that trust is not generated after exposure to a finished advertising message, but is built into the architecture of content production and distribution itself.

The internal logic of this strategy can be described as a sequence of interrelated stages through which trust is converted into transaction. First, creators are selected not primarily on the basis of mechanical reach, but according to their fit with the brand's value profile, communication style, and audience expectations [11]. Second, creators are given meaningful interpretive autonomy, allowing them to present the product through their own narrative conventions, visual language, and rhythm of interaction. This increases perceived authenticity and strengthens the evidentiary value of the recommendation, because the message appears as an extension of ordinary creator communication rather than as a rigidly imposed promotional script. Third, the content is distributed in a format closely aligned with ordinary TikTok consumption patterns, which lowers cognitive resistance and facilitates message acceptance. Finally, the creator's pre existing trust relationship with the audience is converted into purchase action through embedded TikTok Shop tools that shorten the distance between recommendation and transaction.

From an analytical standpoint, this sequence demonstrates how the mechanisms discussed earlier operate in combination. Creator autonomy enhances authenticity signals, platform native delivery increases message acceptability, repeated exposure strengthens parasocial familiarity, and embedded purchasing tools reduce the friction between trust and action. In this sense, the Piera case is important not because it offers an isolated success story, but because it makes visible the practical integration of the explanatory elements identified in the theoretical part of the study. The empirical relevance of this model is further supported by reported commercial outcomes, including a 22 percent increase in average order value among brands operating within a similar creator led logic in 2025 [23].

The case also confirms that content effectiveness on TikTok depends on adaptation to the communicative architecture of the platform. Materials that are too visibly formalized, overly polished, or insufficiently aligned with the expected pace and emotional texture of short form video are less likely to generate trust, because they weaken the perception

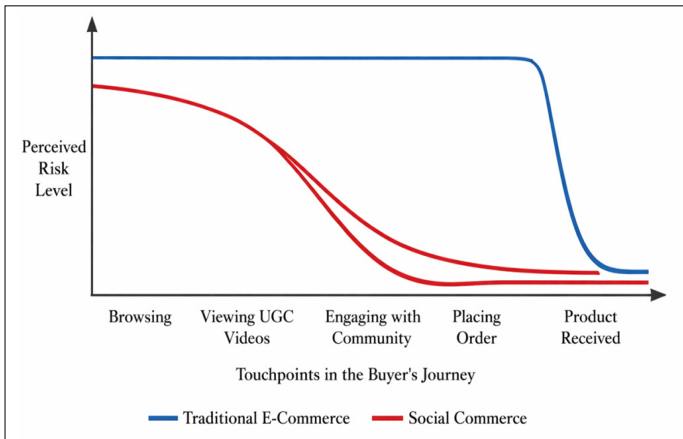
of immediacy and lived experience that underpins creator credibility. Thus, within TikTok Shop native commerce, persuasive efficiency is inseparable from cultural and technical congruence with the platform environment.

From a legal standpoint, this promotion model requires careful qualification of the brand creator relationship. Where remuneration, gifted products, commission based compensation, or other material interests are present, the communication acquires the characteristics of advertising and must therefore meet requirements of proper identification and factual accuracy. In the context of short form video, this issue becomes particularly important because the persuasive force of the message is often grounded in perceived sincerity and spontaneity. Accordingly, the verifiability of product claims, the avoidance of exaggeration, and the consistency of creator content with the information presented on the digital storefront and in the applicable terms of sale become necessary conditions for lawful and trustworthy communication.

No less important is the contractual structuring of cooperation with creators. This includes the allocation of responsibilities for content preparation, compliance with disclosure obligations, liability for inaccurate or misleading statements, procedures for approving legally sensitive formulations, and rules governing the ownership and reuse of audiovisual materials. Additional legal sensitivity arises in relation to the publication and editing of user related content, especially where brand intervention could distort the meaning of the original evaluation or create a misleading impression of independent endorsement. For this reason, the case illustrates that in TikTok based commerce trust is not only a marketing asset, but also a legally conditioned resource that depends on the transparent alignment of commercial intent, creator practice, and consumer expectations.

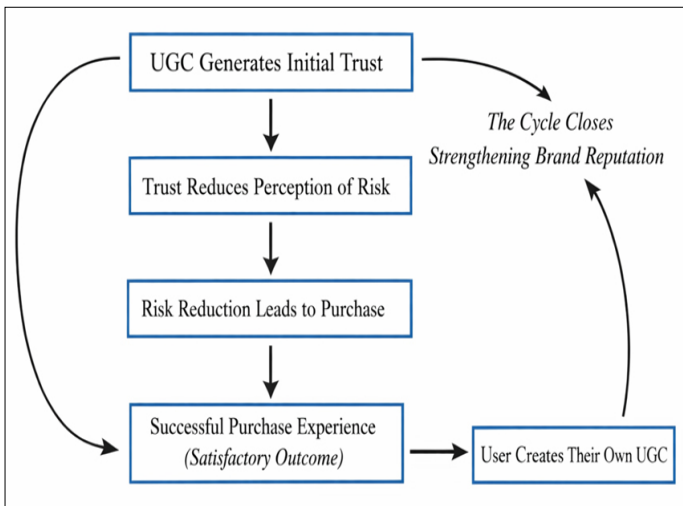
Finally, platform commerce imposes additional requirements for the good-faith organization of sales: transparency of delivery and return conditions, completeness of information about the seller and the product, and predictability of the customer path from viewing to payment. Embedded purchase tools increase decision speed, but simultaneously reduce the "time buffer" for critical verification of information, which increases the role of compliance procedures on the part of the brand and the platform aimed at preventing manipulative practices, artificial trust construction, and substitution of objective information with emotional triggers. Under this approach, "co-creation" with content authors functions not only as a marketing technology, but also as a legally significant construct requiring a balance between freedom of creative interpretation and compliance with good-faith requirements in consumer relations.

For greater clarity, Figure 2 compares levels of risk perception.



**Figure 2.** Comparison of perceived risk levels: Traditional e-commerce vs. Social Commerce (UGC-driven) (compiled by the author based on [11, 23]).

Despite the strong influence of UGC, consumers in 2025 remain sensitive to systemic risks. Delayed seller response and the absence of a transparent returns policy significantly increase the level of uncertainty (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** “Trust–Risk” feedback loop in social commerce (compiled by the author based on [8, 11, 12, 15, 16]).

Institutional signals confirming the reliability of the transactional environment, including platform guarantees, verified review systems, transparent return conditions, and formal product quality assurance, reduce perceived risk and facilitate purchase decision making in social commerce. At the same time, when consumers interact with relatively new or weakly institutionalized marketplace environments, trust is formed through a hybrid combination of signals rather than through brand authority alone. Under such conditions, the center of gravity shifts toward directly observable market evidence, such as verified reviews and demonstrated demand, and toward formal quality markers that make product claims more credible [8].

This hybrid architecture of trust can be clearly illustrated through the Piera case. The product demonstrates sustained demand and confirmed market fit, as evidenced by active purchasing behavior and by approximately 1,000 verified

marketplace reviews. These reviews are analytically important because they do not merely express general satisfaction, but repeatedly describe concrete changes in user behavior and in everyday well being or comfort after product use. In the logic of signaling theory, such reviews function as socially validated experiential evidence that the product addresses a real consumer need. Trust is further strengthened through formal quality assurance, since the product undergoes certification and is expected to obtain official Lab Tested status. As a result, the credibility of the offer is constructed simultaneously through measurable market signals, demand and verified reviews, and through institutional quality criteria, certification and laboratory confirmation.

A comparison of the reviewed materials therefore suggests that in 2024 and 2025 trust in digital commerce acquires a distributed and multi source character. It is no longer derived exclusively from accumulated brand authority, but is produced through the interaction of platform infrastructure, creator or user mediated validation, and formal verification mechanisms. The Piera case is significant precisely because it demonstrates this configuration in an applied commercial setting: consumer confidence is supported at once by community level confirmation of product effectiveness and by procedural signals of quality reliability. Trust thus emerges not as a single attribute of the brand, but as a composite resource in which different signal systems compensate for one another.

The theoretical contribution of the study consists in refining the ADO model by showing that parasocial and social validation mechanisms should be interpreted together with institutional and quality based signals rather than in isolation. Parasocial interaction remains important because it lowers resistance to creator mediated recommendations and increases the perceived relevance of the message [5]. However, the Piera case shows that stable trust in social commerce is strongest when affective and social mechanisms are reinforced by verifiable product level evidence. In this sense, trust is best understood not as a purely emotional response to influencer communication, but as the outcome of an integrated architecture in which social corroboration, market proof, and formal quality assurance jointly reduce uncertainty.

The practical relevance of this conclusion for brands operating within TikTok Shop native logic is that communication strategy should be oriented not only toward visibility or engagement, but toward the systematic production of trustworthy signals. In such a model, creators are important not simply because they attract attention, but because they help translate market and product evidence into socially credible narratives. At the same time, creative autonomy is most effective when it is supported by a product that already demonstrates market fit, verified user feedback, and formal

quality confirmation. Under these conditions, authenticity ceases to be a purely stylistic category and becomes a commercially productive form of trust generation.

## CONCLUSION

The study devoted to trust formation through user-generated content registers a qualitative shift in the logic of consumer choice. In 2024–2025, UGC crystallized into a leading mechanism for reducing perceived risks because it simultaneously activates affective engagement and increases the precision of cognitive quality assessment: emotional response ceases to compete with rationality and instead begins to operate as its amplifier, lowering the threshold of doubt in a situation of limited verifiability of the product and the seller.

Under the expansion of social commerce—estimated by 2025 at a scale of roughly USD 2 trillion—user-generated content acquires the status of a system-forming factor of conversion; empirical data point to its capacity to increase conversion indicators by 74%, moving UGC from the category of a communication tool to that of an infrastructural element of trust. Notably, UGC effectiveness is determined not only by the volume of reviews or visual demonstrativeness, but also by their “normative force”: multiple user testimonies generate a sense of statistical reliability and make risk socially shared—and therefore psychologically less costly.

A key explanatory mechanism is parasocial capital arising from stable repeated audience contacts with content creators. In such a configuration, trust is constructed through an illusion of personal familiarity and predictability of influencer behavior, which partially removes information asymmetry and shifts uncertainty from the domain of the “unknown” to the domain of the “interpretable.” This effect reduces not only financial risk but also social risk—the risk of a choice error subject to evaluation by a salient group—because the influencer’s recommendation is perceived as socially legitimized.

Practical verification of these conclusions is found in the Piera case and, more broadly, in TikTok Shop-native strategies. Commercial outcomes here depend on the brand’s ability to delegate meaning production and demonstration of product value to influencers, thereby ensuring a high level of authenticity and alignment with platform culture. In this context, delegation should be treated not as loss of brand control but as redistribution of functions: the brand retains the identity and quality frame, while the influencer ensures social verification and the linguistic and visual “translatability” of the product into community norms.

The prospective contour for 2026–2030 is described as a technological trust frontier in which convergence is expected between “human” UGC and “impartial” blockchain verification mechanisms. This combination creates a dual architecture of legitimation: the emotional-social level ensures acceptance

and identification, while the technological level ensures verifiability of provenance, supply chains, and authenticity. On this basis, the boundary between social interaction and commerce becomes not merely blurred, but structurally dissolved: communication turns into a transactional circuit, and transactions become a continuation of communication.

Therefore, for brands oriented toward leadership in TikTok Shop, the strategic imperative becomes a move away from transactional logic toward community logic, where trust functions as a self-reproducing resource generated by user activity and supported by the norms of the platform environment. Reducing risk perception through native quality signals under these conditions becomes the key—and, in practice, non-alternative-mechanism of sustainable growth against the background of global digital uncertainty.

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