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Yilong Yang, Nur Atikah A. Rahman, Izzal Asnira Zolkepli

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Influencer persona endorsement and algorithm awareness as drivers of product search intention on Douyin: an extended TPB approach

Yilong Yang, Nur Atikah A. Rahman* and
Izzal Asnira Zolkepli

School of Communication,
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
11800, Penang, Malaysia
Email: yangyilong@student.usm.my
Email: atikaharahman@usm.my
Email: izzalasnira@usm.my
*Corresponding author

Abstract: Short-form video (SFV) platforms have evolved from entertainment hubs into vital e-commerce tools. To understand the drivers of user product-information searching intention (UPIS) on Douyin, this study integrates the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) with self-presentation and advertising value theories. Data collected from 516 respondents were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM) to test eleven hypotheses. The results reveal three distinct pathways influencing search intention: 1) influencer persona traits – specifically authenticity, positivity, and self-congruence – indirectly drive UPIS via subjective norms; 2) endorsement characteristics, including informative and entertainment value, fully mediate UPIS through user attitude towards endorsement (ATE); 3) algorithm awareness positively impacts intention by enhancing perceived behavioural control. Notably, ATE emerged as the dominant driver of behavioural decisions. Theoretically, this research extends the TPB framework by incorporating algorithmic and influencer-specific constructs into the social commerce context. Practically, the findings offer strategic guidance for brands and influencers to optimise content strategies and improve user experience.

Keywords: product search intention; influencer persona; endorsement; algorithm awareness; theory of planned behaviour; Douyin.

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Biographical notes: Yilong Yang is a student at the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. His research interests focus on social media, influencer marketing and consumer behaviour in the digital era.

Nur Atikah A. Rahman is a faculty member at the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her research areas include digital marketing, e-commerce and the impact of new media technologies on user behaviour.

Izzal Asnira Zolkepli is a faculty member at the School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Her research interests include strategic communication, branding and consumer psychology on social media platforms.

1 Introduction

Douyin has become a diversified platform containing e-commerce functions after it was linked to Buy At Ease (an e-commerce platform under the parent company). With the joining of multi-channel network (MCN) companies, Douyin platform are now recognised as a new marketing channel and tool for e-commerce development (Liu, 2022).

Upon these circumstances, Douyin has further updated a new concept, which is called the all-domain interest e-commerce concept in 2023. This concept is to guide and innovate platform e-commerce development models (Tan, 2023). The core of all-domain interest e-commerce concept is that the user's interest drives demand and thus growth in the whole domain (Tan, 2023).

User product-information searching in this concept refers to the behaviour of users who have gained interest in a brand or product in the Douyin content area (Xu et al., 2023), and then take the initiative to learn more about the brand or product by clicking on the link, entering in the search box, viewing the product list, etc. for further information (Gamage and Ashill, 2023). According to a report by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (Chen, 2022), this practice of using content to stimulate user interest and increase product searching behaviour is referred as 'planting grass', which is a Chinese social media slang term that refers to social media users who after being introduced to a brand or product by friends, family, online influencers, or celebrities (He, 2022). Similarly, western scholars have argued that stimulating consumer interest and desire for a product is an important part of marketing strategy as well as consumer behavioural decision-making. According to the attention/awareness, interest, desire and action (AIDA) model, consumer interest in a product is an important precursor to the consumer's needs, desires, and decision-making and can also serve as one of the most important criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of advertising (Duh, 2021). The AIDA model is widely used to understand a wide range of phenomena, ranging from the psychological behaviour of individuals to media-induced consumer behaviour (Pramita and Manafe, 2022). Song et al. (2021) suggested that the stage of desire and need is the emotion caused by interest.

These studies suggest that product-information searching is an important part of consumer decision-making and an effective online marketing strategy. Most previous research has focused on purchase intention, leaving product-information searching intention unstudied. Short-form video accounts for 10% of Douyin 2022 gross merchandise volume (GMV), while live e-commerce accounts for 70% (Sander, 2022). The literature on Douyin SFV content e-commerce is lacking due to a scholarly

bias towards live-streaming (Ahmadi and Hudrasyah, 2022), and Douyin is often mistaken for a live-streaming platform and compared to Taobao (Liu, 2020). As an SFV platform, Douyin has a large content audience, comprehensive functions, and great e-commerce potential (Yin et al., 2023). However, a critical research gap remains: while existing studies acknowledge the potential of SFV, they largely overlook the specific psychological mechanisms that convert passive video consumption into active information searching. Specifically, the interplay between the platform's technological affordances (algorithms) and social signals (influencers) in driving this pre-purchase search behaviour is not well understood. Despite many academic studies on live-streaming, it cannot fill the research gap in short-form video content. This study focuses on user product-information searching intention to improve Douyin platform e-commerce and give Douyin and other SFV platforms more effective product and brand promotion tools.

Algorithm awareness, influencer persona, and endorsement are related when studying Douyin SFV e-commerce user product-information searching intention. Douyin's algorithm is content-based, not community-based (Su and Kaye, 2023). Douyin's algorithm learns users' preferences and habits to better deliver relevant content (Zhang, 2022). Online marketing for Douyin is more effective (Wang et al., 2022). Thus, the algorithm can greatly influence the platform's content distribution (DeVito, 2021), and whether a user has algorithm awareness, which is necessary to understand, accept, and use algorithms, can greatly impact their online experience and the matching content they receive. Gran et al. (2021) found that algorithm awareness varies by demographic, meaning that people's levels of awareness vary. Scholars have directly urged algorithm literacy to be taken seriously (Head et al., 2020). Yet, current literature rarely connects algorithm awareness directly to active information-seeking mechanisms, creating a disconnect between user perception of the system and their subsequent behavioural response.

The influencer persona and endorsement received by platform users should also be studied because algorithm awareness is strongly linked to matching content. Most Douyin content is user-generated. Some Douyin content creators have many followers or high stickiness. Douyin influencers are online personas who attract and influence users through their established image and are often chosen by brands or products for online promotion (Farivar et al., 2021). Douyin influencers must use endorsement content to promote brands or products online. While the influence of personas on purchasing is documented, it is unclear how these self-presentation strategies specifically trigger the intermediate step of information searching.

This research examines Douyin user product-information searching intention using influencer persona, endorsement, and algorithm awareness. This study used the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) as its grounded theory, along with self-presentation theory and advertising value theory. The integration of these three theories is necessary to construct a comprehensive framework: while TPB provides the structural backbone for understanding behavioural intention (the 'will' to search), it lacks specific contextual drivers for social commerce. Therefore, self-presentation theory is incorporated to decode the social influence of the source (the influencer's persona), and advertising value theory is applied to evaluate the utility of the stimulus (the endorsement content). Together, they address the limitations of using TPB in isolation by accounting for both the social and informational drivers unique to the Douyin ecosystem. This study examines how influencer persona, endorsement, and algorithm awareness affect Douyin

product-information searching intention. Three research questions are proposed in this study:

- 1 How does algorithm awareness impact user product-information searching intention on Douyin platform?
- 2 What are the specific reasons in which influencer persona impact user product-information searching intention on Douyin platform?
- 3 What are the specific reasons in which endorsement content impact user product-information searching intention on Douyin platform?

2 Literature review

2.1 Influencer persona in self-presentation theory and TPB

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) is an extension of theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), which explains behavioural intentions and volitional behaviours by individual attitudes and subjective normative factors, and individual control. Subjective norms in the TPB model refer to a person's perception of how significant others perceive his or her behaviour when performing a certain behaviour (Wright et al., 2020).

Based on this concept, the influencer persona is defined as the necessary 'mask' that an influencer sets for a specific target audience on online platforms (Chen, 2022). This is in line with self-presentation theory that was proposed by Goffman (1959). The authenticity self-presentation, positive self-presentation, and self congruence are some of the main types of online self-presentation in previous research (Gao et al., 2023). Therefore, the following hypotheses were developed for this study.

- H1 Authenticity self-presentation of influencer persona has an impact on user subjective norms in Douyin platform.
- H2 Positive self-presentation of influencer persona has an impact on user subjective norms in Douyin platform.
- H3 Self-congruence of influencer persona has an impact on user subjective norms in Douyin platform.

2.2 Endorsement content in advertising value theory and TPB

Attitude refers to an individual's affective or valued response to a behaviour, an evaluation, feeling, and inclination towards a behaviour either good or bad in the TPB model (Sutisna and Handra, 2022). According to advertising value theory proposed by Ducoffe (1996), information value, entertainment value, and credibility are the three positive factors of advertising value. Therefore, creating useful and valuable advertising content for consumers is the basis for the success of influencer marketing (Lee, 2021). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study.

- H4 The informative value of endorsement content has a positive impact on user attitude towards the endorsement in Douyin platform.

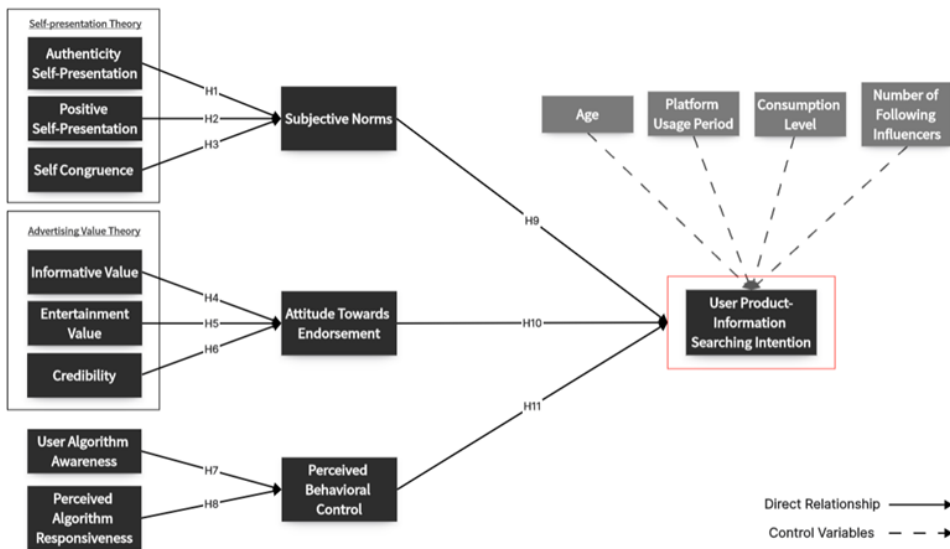
- H5 The entertainment value of endorsement content has a positive impact on user attitude towards the endorsement in Douyin platform.
- H6 The credibility of endorsement content has a positive impact on user attitude towards the endorsement in Douyin platform.

2.3 Algorithm awareness and perceived algorithm responsiveness in TPB

In social media platforms with algorithmic capabilities, the users and platform algorithms are closely related, and the ability of users to engage with algorithms critically and consciously as well as their awareness of how they affect the platform should be viewed as a digital advantage (Gran et al., 2021). On the basis of algorithm awareness, scholars have proposed the concepts of perceived algorithm responsiveness (PAR) to measure the extent of user-algorithm relationship in social media platforms. Therefore, this study hypothesises that,

- H7 User’s algorithm awareness has a positive impact on user perceived behavioural control in Douyin platform.
- H8 Perceived algorithm responsiveness (PAR) has a positive impact on user perceived behavioural control in Douyin platform.

Figure 1 Theoretical framework (see online version for colours)



2.4 Applying TPB theory in Douyin

According to the TPB model, Douyin platform, also as an online platform, can use TPB as a reference model to study user behavioural intention. In this regard, this study proposes the following hypothesis that,

- H9 Subjective norms from influencer persona has a positive impact on user product information searching intention in Douyin platform.
- H10 Users' attitude towards the endorsement has an impact on user product information searching intention in Douyin platform.
- H11 Perceived behavioural control under algorithm awareness has an impact on user product information searching intention in Douyin platform.

Combining all the theories and literature reviews, Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of this study based on the TPB model.

3 Methodology

3.1 Sampling and data collection

This study employed a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey method. Data collection was conducted through an online survey platform using a non-probability convenience sampling technique. The data for this study was collected from 516 college students aged 18 to 30 from 13 universities in Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Center. The selection of college students is appropriate as they represent the primary demographic of active SFV users and are highly sensitive to influencer marketing. Among the respondents, the demographic profile was relatively balanced in terms of gender and grade level, ensuring sample representativeness within the target cohort.

This study also set a series of inclusion criteria:

- 1 aged 18–30 years
- 2 have been using Douyin for at least one month
- 3 have at least one or more following Douyin influencers.

To control for common method bias (CMB) procedurally, the survey was anonymous, and the order of questions was randomised to reduce context effects. Respondents were assured that there were no right or wrong answers to minimise social desirability bias.

3.2 Measures and data analysis

All of the variable questions were 5-point scaled online questions (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree). To ensure content validity, measurement items were adapted from established scales in existing literature and modified to fit the Douyin context. A back-translation method was used to ensure linguistic equivalence between the original English scales and the Chinese questionnaire.

This study used SPSS and SmartPLS software to clean all data. The analysis followed a two-step approach: first, the measurement model was assessed for reliability and validity (convergent and discriminant); second, the structural model was examined to test the hypotheses. The process included descriptive statistics, common method bias test, factor analysis, correlations, multiple linear regression and PLS-SEM data analysis, ultimately leading to the following findings.

4 Results

4.1 Measurement model assessment

The Cronbach’s α coefficient of all variables exceeded 0.7 (α range 0.712–0.822), among which the value of the dependent variable user product-information searching intention (UPSI) reached 0.813. The criterion of reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha > 0.7$) was reached, indicating that the scale has a high degree of internal consistency. The composite reliability (CR) averaged over 0.85, far exceeding the standard of 0.7.

In terms of convergent validity, the average variance extraction (AVE) ranges from 0.567 to 0.658, all meeting the requirement of the 0.5 threshold. Discriminant validity was further confirmed as the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded the correlations between that construct and others (Fornell-Larcker criterion). Common method bias tests (Harman single-factor test) and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) were conducted also. The results of the EFA analysis indicate that the variables exhibit different loadings across different factors, confirming the existence of a multidimensional theoretical structure and validating the structural validity of the study’s design.

4.2 Descriptive statistics and correlation

From the descriptive analysis results of the variables, it is observed that the average values of all variables range from 3.45 to 3.62 (on a 5-point scale), indicating that respondents’ attitudes lean more toward the positive side. Additionally, variance inflation factor (VIF) values were assessed to check for multicollinearity. All VIF values were below the threshold of 5 (ranging from 1.2 to 2.8), suggesting that multicollinearity is not a critical issue in this study. From the correlation matrix in Table 1, this study finds that all variables exhibit significant correlations, meeting the conditions for conducting linear regression or PLS-SEM analysis.

Table 1 Correlations among variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>ASP</i>	<i>PSP</i>	<i>SC</i>	<i>SN</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>EV</i>	<i>CR</i>	<i>ATE</i>	<i>UAA</i>	<i>PAR</i>	<i>PBC</i>	<i>UPIS</i>
ASP	1											
PSP	0.637**	1										
SC	0.477**	0.473**	1									
SN	0.391**	0.441**	0.435**	1								
IV	0.469**	0.489**	0.500**	0.479**	1							
EV	0.443**	0.489**	0.488**	0.396**	0.410**	1						
CR	0.502**	0.535**	0.512**	0.492**	0.538**	0.491**	1					
ATE	0.512**	0.517**	0.506**	0.430**	0.476**	0.458**	0.478**	1				
UAA	0.420**	0.422**	0.516**	0.502**	0.482**	0.469**	0.488**	0.478**	1			
PAR	0.412**	0.458**	0.455**	0.397**	0.479**	0.464**	0.473**	0.488**	0.493**	1		
PBC	0.441**	0.504**	0.429**	0.441**	0.472**	0.444**	0.496**	0.497**	0.418**	0.466**	1	
UPIS	0.485**	0.499**	0.492**	0.410**	0.495**	0.487**	0.498**	0.528**	0.479**	0.476**	0.481**	1

Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.3 Structural model assessment

4.3.1 Direct effects and explanatory power

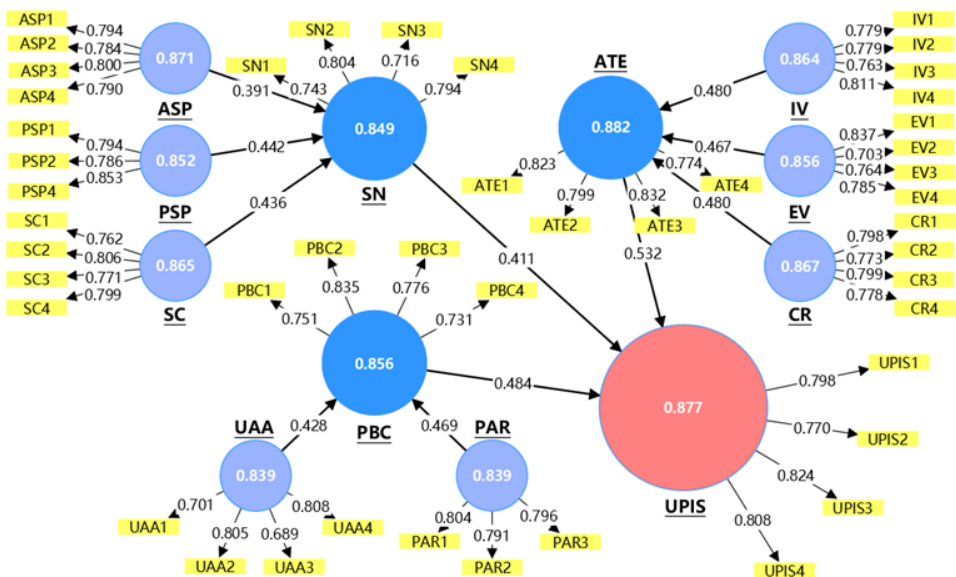
The structural model was assessed to test the direct relationships and the explanatory power (R^2) of the model. The results indicate that the model explains a substantial amount of variance in user product-information searching intention (UPIS), highlighting the predictive relevance of the proposed framework.

Table 2 Comparison of PLS-SEM and MLR results (standardised β)

Path	β (PLS-SEM)	β (MLR)	Difference
PSP \rightarrow SN	0.273***	0.248***	+0.025
ASP \rightarrow SN	0.167***	0.105*	+0.062
PAR \rightarrow PBC	0.342***	0.343***	-0.001
ATE \rightarrow UPIS	0.344***	0.339***	+0.005

The analysis results of PLS-SEM on the hypothesised paths are highly consistent with those of multiple linear regression. All 12 hypotheses are valid and highly significant. Table 2 shows a comparison of the results of PLS-SEM and MLR analysis. Crucially, the direct effect analysis reveals that attitude towards endorsement (ATE) exerts the strongest direct influence on UPIS ($\beta = 0.344$ ***), indicating that user attitude is the primary driver of search behaviour. Furthermore, algorithm awareness (PAR) significantly predicts perceived behavioural control (PBC) ($\beta = 0.342$ ***), validating the technological influence on user agency.

Figure 2 PLS-SEM algorithm model (see online version for colours)



4.3.2 Mediation analysis results

Beyond direct effects, this study examined the mediating mechanisms to understand the pathways of influence. Table 3 presents the results of the mediation analysis for each path. In the ATE path, the mediating path IV→ATE→UPIS (indirect effect = 0.090***) accounts for 34.2% of the total effect. This demonstrates that while informative value (IV) is important, its impact on search intention is largely realised by first shaping a positive user attitude. Similarly, complete mediation was observed in the EV→ATE→UPIS and PAR→PBC→UPIS paths, suggesting that entertainment value and algorithm awareness do not directly trigger search intention but rather operate by enhancing user attitudes and perceived control, respectively.

Table 3 Mediation analysis results

Mediation pathway	Indirect effect	t-value	p-value	95% CI bias-corrected	Conclusion
ASP → SN → UPIS	0.026	2.476	0.013**	[0.009, 0.049]	Partial mediation
PSP → SN → UPIS	0.042	3.171	0.002***	[0.019, 0.071]	Partial mediation
SC → SN → UPIS	0.038	2.850	0.004***	[0.015, 0.067]	Partial mediation
IV → ATE → UPIS	0.090	4.468	<0.001***	[0.054, 0.132]	Complete mediation
EV → ATE → UPIS	0.088	4.632	<0.001***	[0.054, 0.128]	Complete mediation
CR → ATE → UPIS	0.074	4.145	<0.001***	[0.040, 0.109]	Partial mediation
UAA → PBC → UPIS	0.064	3.780	<0.001***	[0.034, 0.100]	Partial mediation
PAR → PBC → UPIS	0.084	4.384	<0.001***	[0.049, 0.124]	Complete mediation

5 Discussion

This study bridges the gap between passive video consumption and active information retrieval by integrating the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) with self-presentation theory and advertising value theory. Unlike previous research that focused solely on purchase intention, this research elucidates the specific psychological mechanisms – social influence, content value, and algorithmic agency – that drive user product-information searching intention (UPIS) on Douyin.

5.1 The dominance of idealised persona over authenticity

Regarding the influence of influencer persona on subjective norms (H1–H3), the results revealed a hierarchy of influence where self-congruence (SC) and positive self-presentation (PSP) exerted significantly stronger effects than authenticity self-presentation (ASP). This finding offers a nuanced interpretation of Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory in the context of short-form video. While 'authenticity' is often touted as essential in social media marketing, this study suggests that regarding information searching, users are more driven by 'idealised performance' – personas that reflect their ideal self-image (self-congruence) or desirable traits (positive self-presentation). Consequently, the social pressure (subjective norm) to search for a product stems less from the influencer being 'real' and more from the influencer representing a lifestyle or identity the user aspires to emulate.

5.2 *Endorsement as 'infotainment'*

The analysis of endorsement characteristics (H4–H6) confirms that attitude towards endorsement (ATE) is the central pathway for decision-making. Consistent with Ducoffe's (1995) advertising value model, informative value (IV) and entertainment value (EV) emerged as the primary drivers, outweighing credibility (CR). This reflects the unique 'infotainment' nature of Douyin, where users expect advertisements to be natively engaging and useful rather than merely credible corporate messages. The data suggests that for a user to transition from watching to searching, the content must first satisfy their need for immediate gratification (entertainment) or utility (information), which then shapes a positive attitude that triggers the behaviour.

5.3 *Algorithm responsiveness and user agency*

A critical contribution of this study is the exploration of algorithm awareness (H7–H8). The results indicate that perceived algorithm responsiveness (PAR) is a stronger predictor of perceived behavioural control (PBC) than general user algorithm awareness (UAA). This supports the 'responsiveness primacy hypothesis' proposed by Taylor and Choi (2022). It implies that merely knowing an algorithm exists (literacy) is insufficient to empower users; rather, users must feel that the algorithm is **responsive** to their inputs. When users perceive that their interactions (likes, follows) effectively train the system to deliver relevant content, their sense of control (PBC) increases, thereby reducing the psychological cost of searching for product information.

5.4 *Addressing the research questions*

Based on the synthesised findings, the answers to the proposed research questions are as follows:

- RQ1 Algorithms: algorithm awareness drives search intention not directly, but by enhancing perceived behavioural control. Specifically, the perception that the algorithm 'listens' and adapts (Responsiveness) is more critical than general technical knowledge in empowering users to initiate a search.
- RQ2 Influencer persona: influencers impact search intention by constructing subjective norms. Users are motivated to search not primarily by how 'authentic' an influencer appears, but by the degree of self-congruence – how well the influencer's persona aligns with the user's actual or ideal self-concept.
- RQ3 Endorsement content: endorsement content drives search intention by shaping a positive attitude towards endorsement. Among the factors, informative value acts as the strongest catalyst, suggesting that users are pragmatic: they search when the content bridges the gap between entertainment and utility.

6 Conclusions and implications

6.1 Conclusions

Product-information searching, as an important part of consumers' decision-making in online marketing, is increasingly considered an important online marketing strategy by the online platforms. This article proposes a new theoretical framework based on the TPB model to study the factors influencing users' product-information searching intention on short-form video platforms. The results revealed that Douyin influencers' authenticity self-presentation, positive self-presentation, and self-congruence indirectly drive user product-information searching intention through subjective norms; endorsement's informative value, entertainment value, and credibility fully mediate user product-information searching intention through user's attitude towards endorsement; and both user algorithm awareness and perceived algorithm responsiveness indirectly drive user product-information searching intention by enhancing users' perceived behavioural control. Specifically, ATE serves as the core driving force behind behavioural decision making.

6.2 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the literature in two key ways. First, it extends the theory of planned behaviour to the algorithmic era by identifying algorithm awareness as a critical antecedent of perceived behavioural control. This challenges the traditional TPB view where control is purely internal, suggesting that in digital environments, control is co-constructed by the user and the system. Second, it enriches the understanding of social commerce by distinguishing between 'authenticity' and 'self-congruence', finding that aspirational identification is a stronger driver of search behaviour than mere realism.

6.3 Practical and policy implications

For managers and influencers, the findings suggest that content strategies should prioritise 'infotainment' – blending utility with entertainment – rather than purely sales-driven pitches. For policymakers and educators, the strong link between algorithm responsiveness and user agency highlights the need for algorithm literacy education. Promoting an understanding of how algorithms work can empower users to navigate platforms more effectively, transforming them from passive recipients to active information seekers.

6.4 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, the data is cross-sectional, which limits the ability to infer strict causality. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track behaviour over time. Second, the sample consists primarily of college students, which may limit generalisability to older demographics. Future studies should expand the sample diversity. Finally, this study focused on Douyin; comparative studies with other platforms like TikTok or Instagram Reels would provide valuable cross-cultural insights.

Declarations

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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