

The Influence of Impulse Purchase on Fashion Enthusiasts' Return Behaviour: The Case of Douyin Live-Streaming Purchase in Shandong, China

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Abstract

This conceptual paper develops an integrated framework to explain return behavior among Douyin fashion consumers by combining Expectation-Confirmation Theory and Trust Theory. It explores how impulse purchase intentions, shaped by emotionally charged live-streaming environments, lead to post-purchase regret and strategic returns. The model identifies trust in platform refund policies as a key moderator, influencing the likelihood of return behaviour. Focusing on Shandong Province, where rising incomes coincide with declining apparel spending, the paper addresses underexplored regional dynamics and proposes hypotheses for future empirical validation. Findings contribute to digital commerce literature by offering a culturally contextualized, emotionally grounded, and platform-specific perspective.

Keywords: Impulse Purchase Intention, Return Behaviour, Douyin Live-Streaming Commerce, Trust in Platform Policies, Expectation-Confirmation Theory, Fashion E-Commerce in China

Introduction

The transformation of China's digital economy has led to the emergence of new consumer environments where entertainment and commerce merge seamlessly. One of the most influential developments in this context is live-streaming e-commerce, especially through platforms such as Douyin. Unlike traditional online retail models that rely on static product descriptions and user reviews, Douyin enables real-time engagement between sellers and viewers, encouraging immediate emotional responses. These platforms create high-pressure, visually engaging environments where consumers are exposed to persuasive promotional content. As a result, impulse purchasing has become a defining feature of the live-stream shopping experience, particularly in fashion categories where visual appeal and social validation strongly influence buying behaviour.

Although live-streaming commerce has significantly boosted consumer participation and transaction volumes, it has also given rise to operational challenges. In 2024, live-streaming

platforms generated over 597 billion USD (¥4.3 trillion) in online sales, accounting for 32.87 percent of China's total e-commerce market value (News.CN, 2025; Sina, 2025). However, the surge in emotionally driven purchases has been paralleled by an increase in product return rates. National reports indicate that live-stream transactions now face a return rate of 60 percent for fashion goods, which exceeds that of conventional online purchases (China News, 2024). This phenomenon highlights a growing disconnect between initial purchase motivation and post-purchase satisfaction.

A closer look at regional consumption patterns reveals further insights. In Shandong Province, which is both economically dynamic and digitally advanced, the relationship between rising income and apparel spending appears imbalanced. From 2020 to 2024, average disposable income increased steadily from 2,908.70 USD (¥20,940) to 5,844.99 USD (¥42,077), yet consumer expenditure on apparel rose only slightly from 199.72 USD (¥1,438) to 221.81 USD (¥1,597). Consequently, the proportion of income spent on fashion declined from 6.87 percent to 3.80 percent (Shandong Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2024). This decline suggests that apparel is becoming a less significant financial priority, possibly viewed by consumers as a flexible or replaceable product category. The affordability of returns, coupled with generous refund policies, has further encouraged this trend in casual post-purchase behaviour.

This conceptual paper seeks to explore the mechanisms through which impulse buying and platform-driven promotions influence consumer return behavior in Douyin live-stream fashion commerce. The study is grounded in Expectation-Confirmation Theory and Trust Theory, aiming to develop a model that explains how emotional purchase intentions, perceived refund convenience, and promotional tactics contribute to return decisions. Trust in platform refund policies is introduced as a moderating factor to examine how institutional credibility may shape consumer evaluation processes after purchase. By addressing this behavioural dynamic, the paper contributes a theoretical framework to better understand evolving consumer habits and platform-level challenges in China's fast-moving digital commerce environment.

Problem Statement

Live-streaming commerce has become a dominant force in China's digital retail ecosystem, yet it presents emerging risks that threaten platform sustainability and seller profitability. Douyin, in particular, leverages scarcity marketing, influencer branding, and real-time interactivity to create highly persuasive shopping experiences. However, these same features also drive emotionally reactive, low-deliberation purchases, which consumers may later regret (Wei et al., 2025). The result is a surge in product return rates, especially in the fashion category, where sensory misjudgments regarding size, color, or texture are common (Liu & Liang, 2025). According to the 2020 China Live E-Commerce Industry Research Report (DFCFW, 2020) and 100EC Report (2024), the product return rate of female fashion goods rose from 30-50 percent in 2020 to 80-90 percent in 2024, highlighting a structural problem. While prior studies often isolate this as a logistical or marketing issue, few have examined the deeper psychological and trust-based mechanisms that reinforce such return behaviour.

The challenge is particularly acute in regions like Shandong, where live-streaming commerce is not only popular but deeply embedded in consumer culture. Despite increasing disposable income, the proportion of spending on apparel goods is steadily declining, suggesting

consumers view fashion purchases as low-commitment or trial-based (Shandong Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2024). This shift aligns with the rise of “risk-free shopping” mentalities, where easy refund processes diminish the consequences of impulsive purchases (Li et al., 2024). However, platform-level trust mechanisms, such as refund guarantees and influencer credibility, are under-theorized in current literature. Understanding how these elements shape post-purchase decisions is essential for designing interventions that can stabilize return behavior without compromising engagement. Without such insight, platforms like Douyin face a trade-off between transaction volume and long-term user loyalty.

Limitations

This paper is conceptual in nature and does not involve empirical data collection or statistical validation, which limits its ability to generalize findings across diverse user groups or e-commerce platforms. The discussion is contextually restricted to Douyin’s fashion live-streaming environment in Shandong Province and does not extend to other product categories or regions within China. Additionally, the model is based on secondary literature and theoretical synthesis, which may overlook emerging behavioural nuances not yet captured in existing studies. While the proposed framework aims to explain impulse-return dynamics and the role of trust, its practical effectiveness requires future empirical testing. These boundaries define the paper’s scope and emphasize its focus on theory-building rather than predictive modeling.

Literature Review

Understanding return behaviour in fashion-focused e-commerce requires an interdisciplinary exploration of psychological impulses, post-purchase cognition, and socio-technological trust mechanisms (Ong et al., 2020). The literature reveals that while impulse purchases and returns have become normalized in global digital commerce, particularly in fashion and live-streaming sectors, existing models tend to isolate emotional and cognitive mechanisms rather than integrate them (Islam et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is a noticeable gap in research that focuses on Douyin, China’s dominant live-stream platform, and its unique influence on trust formation and return behaviours. This review synthesizes global, regional, and China-specific scholarship across four central dimensions: impulse purchase intent, return behaviour, trust, and platform policy structures.

Impulse Buying and Return Behaviour

Globally, impulse purchases are increasingly driven by emotionally charged e-commerce interfaces, often resulting in post-purchase regret and elevated return rates (Lysenko-Ryba, 2021; Obukhovich et al., 2024). This is particularly visible in Western countries like Germany and the U.S., where emotionally triggered purchases in fashion are mitigated through well-regulated return systems that treat product returns as planned extensions of the shopping process (Stöcker et al., 2021; Han, 2023). In contrast, consumers in developing regions like Pakistan and Indonesia show greater hesitation to return due to logistical, cultural, or platform trust constraints (Ahmed et al., 2024; Febrilia et al., 2024).

Regionally in Asia, impulse buying is shaped not only by emotion but also by collectivist social norms. In India and Malaysia, live-stream environments induce a psychological flow state, particularly among urban Gen Z shoppers, encouraging emotionally-driven purchases (Kumar & Taneja, 2024; Rosely et al., 2024). However, collectivist values and the desire to maintain

social harmony often prevent dissatisfied consumers from initiating returns, with many opting to gift or repurpose products instead. This reflects a decoupling between cognitive regret and behavioural correction, highlighting the need for integrated emotional-cognitive models that better explain this disparity.

In China, impulse purchase behavior is even more pronounced due to the immersive nature of platforms like Douyin and Taobao Live. Anchors' persuasive narratives, countdown timers, and live chat interactivity stimulate short-term emotional gratification at the expense of rational evaluation (Huang & Suo, 2021; Zhang, Cheng, & Huang, 2023). Impulse purchases in this environment frequently lead to cognitive dissonance and are followed by high return volumes, particularly when product promises do not meet expectations (Chen, Chen, & Lin, 2023; Duan & Song, 2024). However, despite abundant behavioral data, few studies have mapped this emotional-cognitive cycle within a unified conceptual framework. Moreover, existing research generalizes across platforms, leaving Douyin-specific patterns underexplored.

Refund Convenience and Return Behaviour

Globally, refund convenience is one of the most consistent predictors of return behavior. In mature markets such as Germany and the U.S., refund systems are institutionalized, allowing consumers to treat returns as a frictionless and routine activity (Stöcker et al., 2021; Han, 2023). This institutional trust in the return process empowers consumers to make high-risk, low-evaluation purchases.

In Asia, however, refund convenience is less consistent and more contextually dependent. In India and Vietnam, for instance, consumers are willing to tolerate product dissatisfaction when refunds involve bureaucratic steps or are deemed socially awkward (Ho, 2022; Kaushik et al., 2022). Malaysia presents a similar pattern, where the ease of refund and preservation of "face" play a critical role in post-purchase decisions (Rosely et al., 2024). These findings emphasize that technical accessibility must be complemented by cultural and emotional convenience, i.e. a notion rarely captured in existing refund behaviour models.

China offers one of the world's most advanced refund ecosystems, powered by AI-based return prediction, mobile logistics, and real-time feedback (Xu et al., 2023; Rese & Pan, 2023). Yet, Chinese consumers engage in strategic return behaviors influenced by online peer feedback, platform reputation, and social learning. Return intentions are validated not only by policy clarity but also by collective endorsement from user reviews or influencer cues (Liu et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2024). Despite this richness, few conceptual studies have linked platform policy, AI-driven return structures, and emotional trust within a singular framework, particularly in relation to Douyin. Moreover, there is an absence of localized return data from less urbanized regions like Shandong, where digital habits may diverge from national averages.

Sales Promotions, Cost-Effectiveness, and Post-Purchase Evaluation

Sales promotions globally serve as double-edged swords: they drive conversion but also amplify post-purchase regret. In Spain and Poland, aggressive discounting tactics in live-stream commerce foster unreflective purchases, leading to high return rates (Tobon & Abril, 2024; Lysenko-Ryba, 2021). In contrast, German consumers display a more sceptical,

utilitarian approach to promotions, with less promotional regret and lower return volumes (Stöcker et al., 2021).

Regionally, promotional intensity in India and Malaysia taps into loss aversion and collectivist thrill-seeking, especially during flash sales or live events (Das & Dutta, 2022; Rosely et al., 2024). Yet again, these emotion-laden purchases do not always lead to returns due to culturally embedded restraint and financial tolerance thresholds.

In China, promotional activities, especially on Douyin, are tightly integrated with livestream performance, emotional urgency, and cultural rituals such as festival campaigns. Consumers often purchase based on communal urgency or influencer enthusiasm, but once the stimulus fades, pragmatic reassessment sets in, often triggering returns (Song, Peng, & Zeng, 2025; Miranda et al., 2024). However, there remains limited research that frames these post-promotional returns within a broader trust-based framework that explains how emotional highs translate into behavioral reversals, particularly under the moderation of platform trust and consumer self-rationalization.

Trust and Platform Policy Structures

Trust emerges across literature as a decisive moderator of return behavior, yet its operationalization varies widely. In Western markets, institutional trust in platform governance stabilizes impulsive consumption (Han, 2023). In Asia, trust is more relational and socially constructed, shaped by online reviews, parasocial bonds with influencers, and peer validation (Kim & Jung, 2025; Kumar & Taneja, 2024). These variations point to a need for nuanced frameworks that capture trust as both a precondition for purchase and a post-condition for return moderation.

China's trust dynamics are technologically embedded and culturally fluid. Consumers trust not only in sellers or influencers, but in platform-mediated guarantees such as instant refunds, AI sentiment analysis, and visible accountability (Qi, 2024; Xu et al., 2023). When these mechanisms fail, or when trust is violated by exaggerated claims, return behavior spikes rapidly. Yet, this fluid trust system is rarely conceptualized in a structured way. While prior research addresses technological efficiency and psychological regret separately, few studies integrate these elements into a trust-based return framework, particularly on Douyin.

Research Questions

1. RQ1: How does impulse purchase intention influence return behaviour among Douyin fashion consumers in Shandong?
2. RQ2: How does consumer trust in platform refund policies moderate the relationship between impulse purchase intention and return behaviour?

Research Objectives

1. RO1: To study the impulse purchase intention influence return behaviour among Douyin fashion consumers in Shandong.
2. RO2: To examine the consumer trust in platform refund policies, moderate the relationship between impulse purchase intention and return behaviour.

Research Methodology

This conceptual study adopts a theory-driven deductive approach to develop and justify a model explaining the return behavior of fashion consumers on Douyin, based on Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT) and Trust Theory. The methodology focuses on constructing a logically grounded framework that integrates emotional (impulse purchase intention) and cognitive (return behaviour and trust) elements to explain how consumer decisions unfold in live-streaming environments.

The framework identifies impulse purchase intention as the independent variable and return behavior as the dependent variable, with consumer trust in platform refund policies as a moderating variable. This conceptual configuration is rooted in existing empirical insights that highlight emotional arousal during live-stream shopping and the role of platform credibility in reducing post-purchase regret. By connecting these dimensions through established theories, the study formulates a cause-effect pathway that reflects both immediate emotional triggers and post-purchase rationalization processes.

The use of Expectation-Confirmation Theory allows this model to explain return behaviour as an outcome of unmet expectations and emotional disconfirmation following impulsive decisions. At the same time, Trust Theory provides a foundation to justify why high trust in refund systems can reduce the consumer's need to reverse the transaction, even in the presence of regret or dissatisfaction.

Though no empirical data are analysed in this paper, the proposed model is designed to be empirically testable in future studies using structural equation modelling (SEM). Suggested operationalization includes measuring impulse purchase intent via validated scales (e.g., Zhang et al., 2023 & Golalizadeh et al., 2023), return behaviour through behavioural intention metrics, and platform trust through consumer perceptions of policy transparency, refund efficiency, and fairness. The conceptual model may also be tested specifically in Shandong, a region with rising digital consumption but underexplored in existing e-commerce literature.

Data Analysis Plan

This paper analyses recent literature from 2021 to 2025 through thematic synthesis to construct a conceptual framework. Sources are selected based on their relevance to impulse buying, return behaviour, refund convenience, and trust in live-streaming fashion commerce, particularly within Douyin.

Key themes are extracted to identify how emotional triggers and post-purchase rationalization are treated across studies. These themes are reviewed against Douyin-specific practices and cultural consumption patterns. Emphasis is placed on how emotional and cognitive mechanisms are conceptually linked.

Finally, trust-related literature is assessed to determine its moderating effect on return behaviour. This layered synthesis guides the development of data analysis by mapping conceptual relationships, isolating gaps, and integrating theories to form a coherent model explaining Douyin consumer behaviour.

Findings and Conclusion

This conceptual paper proposes a culturally contextualized and theoretically integrated framework for understanding post-purchase return behaviour among Douyin fashion consumers. Drawing on Expectation-Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980) and Trust Theory (Mayer et al., 1995), the model articulates how emotionally charged purchases, induced by live-stream environments, are often followed by a cognitive dissonance phase that leads to return behavior. The Douyin platform introduces a dual-process dynamic where gratification and regret coexist, making the return decision a unique interplay between affective impulses and rational evaluations.

A core finding is the decisive role of impulse purchase intention in initiating the consumption-return cycle. As supported by Huang and Suo (2021) and Zhang, Cheng, and Huang (2023), live-stream promotions create immersive, high-pressure decision environments that suppress deliberation and accelerate buying decisions. The live format activates emotional triggers, i.e. urgency, scarcity, influencer appeal, which propel consumers toward purchases that may not align with actual needs or expectations. Chen, Chen, and Lin (2023) emphasize that once the immediate gratification fades, consumers re-enter a rational evaluation state, often leading to product returns when expectations are unmet. This aligns with findings from Duan and Song (2024), who noted a strong correlation between emotionally-driven purchases and post-delivery dissatisfaction in Chinese live-stream commerce.

The second key insight is the moderating function of trust in platform refund policies. Unlike in Western markets where institutional trust is embedded in return regulations (Stöcker et al., 2021), in China, trust is socially and situationally constructed. It is shaped by peer reviews (Xu et al., 2023), influencer integrity (Lina, Hou & Ali, 2022), and transparent platform processes (Qi, 2024). High trust in platform responsiveness mitigates the effects of impulse regret, as consumers feel confident that returns are accessible and fair. Conversely, low trust intensifies return behavior as a corrective or retaliatory act against perceived manipulation (Liu et al., 2022). This trust-return relationship is particularly fluid in Douyin commerce, where credibility is distributed between platform design and real-time human interaction (Linh & Park, 2025).

This model also contributes localized insights by focusing on Shandong's fashion e-commerce trends. Despite a significant increase in disposable income, from \$2,908.70 USD (¥20,940) in 2020 to \$5,844.99 USD (¥42,077) in 2024, the share of income spent on apparel declined from 6.87% to 3.80% (Shandong Provincial Statistical Bulletin, 2024). This declining ratio suggests rising consumer cost-awareness and a reduced emotional commitment to apparel purchases. Such patterns reinforce the logic of "try-and-return" behavior, where products are acquired with the implicit understanding that returns are risk-free and operationally easy (Feng et al., 2024). These behavioral shifts are further magnified by regional digital maturity and logistics convenience (Song, Peng & Zeng, 2025).

Theoretically, this model challenges the adequacy of unidimensional return frameworks which rely solely on dissatisfaction or product quality (Wood, 2001). It proposes a dual-process conceptualization, where impulse triggers (stimulus phase) and post-purchase rationalization (organism-response phase) must be jointly analysed. This aligns with Verhagen

and Dolen's (2011) call for recognizing emotional dissonance in e-commerce settings and extends their model by embedding cultural and platform-specific moderators.

Table 1

List of Core Insights

Key Conceptual Dimension	Core Insight	Supporting References
Impulse Purchase Intention	Emotionally charged live-stream sessions heighten impulsivity, reducing rational control.	Huang & Suo (2021); Zhang, Cheng & Huang (2023); Chen, Chen & Lin (2023); Duan & Song (2024)
Post-Purchase Rationalization	Consumers re-evaluate purchases after gratification fades, often leading to returns.	Oliver (1980); Verhagen & Dolen (2011); Chen, Chen & Lin (2023)
Trust in Platform Refund Policies	Trust moderates return behavior; high transparency softens impulse regret.	Mayer et al. (1995); Lina, Hou & Ali (2022); Qi (2024); Xu et al. (2023); Linh & Park (2025); Liu et al. (2022)
Shandong-Specific Behavior	Higher income but lower apparel spending signals cost consciousness and selective returns.	Shandong Provincial Statistical Bulletin (2024); Feng et al. (2024); Song, Peng & Zeng (2025)
Dual-Process Model of Return	Returns are driven by both emotional impulse and cognitive dissonance, requiring integrated theory.	Wood (2001); Verhagen & Dolen (2011); Bai et al. (2023); Liu et al. (2022)

In conclusion, this paper advances the literature on digital return behavior by proposing a Douyin-specific, emotionally grounded, and culturally responsive framework. It emphasizes that returns in live-streaming commerce are not simply about product flaws, they are about cognitive-emotional misalignment, platform trust dynamics, and regional economic behavior. For Douyin and similar platforms, the implications are urgent: reducing return rates requires not only technical solutions like AI-based product recommendations, but also trust-building, transparent refund practices, and influencer accountability.

Recommendation

This study proposes a dual-process return model involving impulse purchase and platform trust. Future studies should conduct empirical testing using quantitative, cross-sectional methods. Targeting fashion enthusiasts offers consistency with this paper's focus and reflects the most affected consumer group.

Empirical validation is critical to confirm whether trust in platform policies moderates regret-driven returns after impulse purchases. Cross-sectional data can reveal demographic variations, uncovering whether consumer age, income, or digital habits influence post-purchase evaluation patterns.

Given the high return rate in Shandong, future research should be region-specific to ensure contextual accuracy and policy relevance. Empirical evidence will help platforms optimize refund systems and reduce fashion return rates while sustaining consumer engagement.

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