



From Scroll to Sale: A Service-Journey Perspective on Trust Formation in Generation Z's Social Commerce Behavior

Peeraya Thongkruer¹

¹College of Innovative Management, Valaya Alongkorn Rajabhat University

Abstract: Generation Z now drives much of the growth in Thai social commerce, yet most research explains their buying behavior with a single snapshot of trust usually measured right before a purchase decision. In real platform use, trust is not built once; it is formed, tested, and revised across several distinct moments, from scrolling past a video to posting a review after the product arrives. This conceptual paper proposes a simple way to organize those moments: the Digital Trust Journey (DTJ), a five-step model Discovery, Engagement, Verification, Transaction, and Advocacy describing how a Generation Z consumer's basis for trust changes as they move from a short-video feed toward a completed, shared purchase. Each step is paired with the type of trust that matters most at that point and the kind of response a seller can use to address it. Three simple propositions make the model testable, and the paper closes with practical implications for Thai small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) selling through platforms such as TikTok Shop and Facebook Live, and a short research agenda for scholars studying Generation Z as digital consumers.

Keywords: Generation Z, social commerce, parasocial relationship, livestream commerce

Introduction

Social commerce buying products directly through social media and short video apps-has become a normal part of shopping for young people in Thailand. Thailand's social commerce market is now one of the fastest-growing in the region, and TikTok has become the country's leading platform for both discovering products and watching live selling (Digital Marketing for Asia, 2025). Generation Z, the cohort born roughly between the mid 1990s and the early 2010s (Dimock, 2019), sits at the center of this shift. For this generation, watching entertainment, talking to friends, and shopping often happen in the same app, in the same few minutes-a pattern often called "shoppertainment."

Two streams of research try to explain why Generation Z buys the way they do. The first uses the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991), which says that intention to buy comes from attitude,

social pressure, and how easy the purchase feels, and researchers have added things like influencer credibility to this model to fit social media (Djafarova & Fouts, 2022). The second stream studies livestream selling and shows that viewers trust a seller partly because they feel a personal bond with that seller, even though they have never met (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020; Sun, Shao, Li, Guo, & Nie, 2019).

Both streams are useful, and both are used in this paper. But both also share the same weak point: they measure trust at one moment only, usually right before someone decides to buy. In real life, a young shopper's trust is not built in one moment. It changes as they move through several very different steps: scrolling past a video, following a seller, reading comments, choosing a payment method, and sometimes posting their own review afterward. A brand that fixes the wrong step wastes its effort for example, making a livestream more entertaining will not help if the real problem is that shoppers do not trust the payment method.

This paper offers a simple way to think about this sequence, borrowed from service marketing's idea of the "customer journey" (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) the idea that a customer's experience is a path, not a single point. Combining this idea with TPB and livestream-trust research produces the Digital Trust Journey (DTJ), a five-step model described in Section 3 The goal is not to introduce a complicated new theory, but to give researchers and Thai sellers a clear, practical map of where trust is won or lost along the way.

Why a Journey View Is Needed

Generation Z did not adopt social shopping as adults, the way older generations did they grew up with it, so short videos and livestreams feel as normal to them as walking into a shop. Reports on Thai consumers show that short-video and livestream formats are now a leading way people discover and buy products, more than searching directly on a shopping website (Digital Marketing for Asia, 2025). This matters because it means trust starts forming much earlier than the moment of purchase it starts the moment a video appears in someone's feed, long before they think of themselves as "shopping" at all.

The two existing research streams each capture only part of this picture. TPB studies usually ask people how they feel right before buying, which treats the whole earlier process scrolling, following, watching, comparing as if it did not matter. Livestream-trust studies do look closely at one part of that process (the live broadcast itself) and show convincingly that a personal, one-sided bond with the seller, sometimes called a parasocial relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956), builds real trust. But these studies

rarely ask what happened before the viewer found that livestream, or what the viewer does after the parcel arrives.

The present author's own past research reflects a similar lesson from a different setting: studying air travel and clinic services, trust was found to sit in the middle of the customer's experience, connecting how a service is delivered to whether the customer returns (Thongkruer & Wanarat, 2020; Thongkruer & Wanarat, 2023). Field work mapping how patients move step-by-step through a clinic visit showed that the point where trust breaks down is often not where marketers assume it is. Applying that same habit of thinking following the customer through each step rather than asking about their feelings only once is the basis for the framework proposed next.

The Digital Trust Journey (DTJ): A Five-Step Model

The Digital Trust Journey (DTJ) describes five steps a Generation Z shopper typically moves through, from the first time they see a seller's content to the point where they might tell others about it. Each step relies on a different kind of trust, and each call for a different response from a seller. The five steps are summarized in Table 1 and explained below in plain terms.

Step 1: Discovery The journey usually starts by accident, not by searching. A short video simply appears in someone's feed. At this point, the shopper is not evaluating a purchase at all they are only forming a quick, first impression: does this seller seem genuine and does this content feel relevant to them? This first impression, built from repeated small exposures rather than one advertisement, is what leads someone to follow an account in the first place.

Step 2: Engagement Once someone follows a seller, they start watching livestreams, commenting, and reacting over time. Trust at this step comes from feeling personally connected to the seller or creator, even without ever meeting them a bond researchers call a parasocial relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Studies of Thai livestream selling confirm that viewers who feel this kind of connection are more likely to trust the seller and eventually buy (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). This trust is personal: a shopper may trust one specific creator far more than they trust the platform or the product category in general.

Step 3: Verification Before actually buying, most shoppers look for proof beyond the seller's own claims reading comments, checking review counts, and looking at what other buyers have posted. This step works like word-of-mouth: instead of trusting the seller directly, the shopper trusts the visible

behavior of other strangers who already bought the product (Ajzen, 1991). It acts as a check on Step 2 a shopper can like a creator personally and still want independent proof that the product performs as shown.

Step 4: Transaction At checkout, trust shifts one more time away from the seller and toward the platform itself: is the payment safe, and will the order actually arrive? This is closer to confidence in the system than confidence in a person. In Thailand, familiar tools such as PromptPay and established e-wallets likely make this step easier, because the shopper is relying on a payment system they already trust, not on an unfamiliar seller.

Step 5: Advocacy For many Generation Z shoppers, the journey does not end at checkout. Buyers often post their own unboxing videos, reviews, or mentions of the brand, partly because talking about what they buy is part of how they express who they are (John, 1999). This last step matters for another reason too: this same content is often what appears in someone else's feed later, starting their journey at Step 1 closing the loop between the last step and the first.

Table 1 The Digital Trust Journey (DTJ): five steps, what drives trust at each, and what sellers can do.

Step	What the Shopper Is Doing	What Builds Trust Here	What a Seller Can Do
1. Discovery	Scrolling; a video appears on the feed by chance	First impression of the creator and content	Post consistent, relatable short form content
2. Engagement	Following the seller; watching livestreams; commenting	Feeling a personal bond with the seller (Horton & Wohl, 1956)	Show up consistently; reply to comments and questions
3. Verification	Reading reviews and comments before deciding	Proof from other buyers, not the seller (Ajzen, 1991)	Make reviews and buyer photos easy to find
4. Transaction	Checking out; choosing a payment method	Confidence in the platform and payment system	Offer familiar payment options (e.g., PromptPay) and clear buyer protection

Step	What the Shopper Is Doing	What Builds Trust Here	What a Seller Can Do
5. Advocacy	Posting a review or unboxing video after buying	Satisfaction and a sense of identity tied to the brand (John, 1999)	Gently invite buyers to share their experience

Three Simple Propositions To keep the model testable, its logic can be stated as three simple propositions.

P1: Moving from Discovery to Engagement depends mainly on whether the content and creator feel credible — not on whether the shopper has formed a specific opinion about the product yet.

P2: Moving from Engagement to Verification depends mainly on how strong the shopper's personal connection to the seller is a stronger bond leads to a stronger wish to double-check the seller's claims against other buyers' experience, not less of one.

P3: Moving from Verification through Transaction to Advocacy depends less on trust in any one seller and more on trust in the platform and system meaning that even a well-liked seller can lose a sale at checkout if platform-level trust (payment, delivery) is weak.

A Short Illustration A brief example may make the five steps easier to picture. Imagine a small Thai skincare seller, "Nong Fah's Shop," running a TikTok account. A university student scrolls past one of Nong Fah's short videos about a facial serum (Discovery). The video is casual and funny rather than a hard sell, so the student follows the account and, over the next two weeks, watches a few of Nong Fah's livestreams, laughing at the jokes and asking a question in the comments that Nong Fah answers directly (Engagement). Liking Nong Fah personally is not, by itself, enough to buy: the student scrolls through the comment section looking for other buyers' before-and-after photos and checks how many people have already ordered (Verification). Reassured, the student adds the serum to cart and pays through a familiar e-wallet rather than a bank transfer to an unknown account, because the in-app buyer protection feels safer (Transaction). Two weeks later, pleased with the results, the student posts a short review video tagging Nong Fah's shop (Advocacy) and that video is exactly the kind of content another student might scroll past next week, starting the cycle again at Discovery.

This short story illustrates why the five steps are useful separately rather than as one combined idea. If Nong Fah's shop had excellent production quality (helping Discovery) but never replied to

comments (hurting Engagement), or had many followers but no visible reviews (hurting Verification), the same overall "good marketing" could still fail to produce a sale and knowing which step is weak points to a very different fix each time.

What This Means in Practice

For researchers, the DTJ model offers one main idea worth testing further: trust in social commerce is not one thing measured once, but several different things measured at different moments. This suggests that future studies should ask which step of the journey they are actually measuring, rather than treating "trust" as a single score.

For Thai sellers, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the value of this model is practical. Instead of assuming that "low sales" always means "the livestream needs to be better," a seller can ask which step is actually failing. A seller with many views but few followers has a Step 1 problem — the content is not building a personal connection. A seller with an engaged livestream audience but few completed purchases more likely has a Step 3 or Step 4 problem shoppers may want more visible reviews, or may be unsure about payment safety, not a more entertaining broadcast. This way of diagnosing a business problem step by step reflects an approach the present author has used directly in service-consulting work with small businesses, tracing exactly where in a customer's experience trust or hesitation appears, rather than treating a whole customer experience as one single moment.

A practical way for a Thai SME to use this model is to keep a simple weekly count at each step: how many new followers came from content (Step 1), how many followers actually comment or watch a full livestream (Step 2), how many product pages get review clicks (Step 3), how many carts are completed versus abandoned (Step 4), and how many buyers post their own content afterward (Step 5). A sharp drop between any two steps points directly to where marketing effort should go next, rather than spreading a limited budget evenly across content, ads, and promotions without knowing which one is actually needed.

Limitations and Future Research

As a conceptual paper, the DTJ model's claims are proposals to be tested, not findings. A few limits are worth noting plainly. Not every shopper follows all five steps in order some may buy directly from a livestream they just discovered, skipping Verification entirely, and future research should look at when and why this shortcut happens. The model also does not yet address shoppers who move across more than one platform during a single purchase decision, which is common in practice. Finally, the model is built

around the Thai social commerce context specifically, so testing it in other countries, and eventually with younger cohorts such as Generation Alpha, remains open for future work.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that trust in Generation Z's social commerce behavior is better understood as something built step by step, not decided all at once. The Digital Trust Journey model offers a simple five-step way to describe that process Discovery, Engagement, Verification, Transaction, and Advocacy — and to identify what kind of trust matters at each step. As Thailand's social commerce market keeps growing, being able to tell the difference between a discovery problem, a connection problem, a proof problem, and a payment-confidence problem is more useful, both for research and for practice, than treating trust as one number to raise. The three propositions offered here are meant as a starting point for testing this idea further, not as a finished answer.

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