

Social Stratification and Digital Divide: How Socioeconomic Identity Shapes Online Shopping Behaviour Across Class Groups

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Abstract: *The rapid expansion of e-commerce has intensified concerns about the digital divide and its implications for social stratification and consumer behaviour. While digitalisation is often framed as a democratising force, evidence shows that inequalities in access, skills, and usage reproduce and sometimes deepen existing class hierarchies in the online marketplace. This systematic literature review synthesises research on the digital divide, socioeconomic status, and online shopping behaviour to understand how socioeconomic identity shapes consumers' engagement with e-commerce across class groups.*

Based on a thematic synthesis of peer-reviewed primary articles and reviews (mostly from 2000 to 2025), the review brings together three bodies of literature: research on first-, second- and third-level divides and consumption; studies on socioeconomic status and online purchasing behaviour; and analyses on digital inequality and internet retailing. Results revealed that digital stratification operates on at least three levels access, skills, and outcomes and that socioeconomic identity colors how consumers conceptualize risk, trust, convenience, and value in online shopping. Lower SES and less educated individuals face infrastructural and skill barriers, are more skeptical of online shopping, and make greater use of cash-centric or offline-merge channels, whereas higher status individuals have greater access to convenience, breadth and, increasingly, personalised digital options.

The review reveals several gaps, such as a nascent engagement with sociological understandings of class and identity within the digital-marketing and e-commerce literature; a dearth of research that conceptualises SES identity as a psychological -sociological rather than purely demographic construct; and limited cross-cultural and longitudinal research examining how digital divides develop and influence consumption. It introduces SES identity as a lens bridging macro-level stratification and micro-level online shopping decisions, and it suggests avenues for future inquiry on usable digital commerce..

Keywords: *e-commerce*

I. INTRODUCTION

The widespread adoption of internet technologies and e-commerce services has changed the manner in which information is sought, products are evaluated, and purchases are executed by consumers. Although this transformation is generally celebrated as empowering consumers with more options and convenience, it also gives rise to concerns over the digital divide -the unequal access to and utilization of digital technologies—and its consequences on social stratification. With the increasing digitization of societies, those living on the margins, lacking access or the necessary skills, or those not feeling capable, are at risk of being left behind not just in terms of information and services, but also the economic opportunities offered by online markets.



Sociological literature has established that social class, as measured by indicators of income, education, and occupation, or factors correlated with these such as race and ethnicity, structures access to material and cultural resources and consumption patterns. In the digital age, these class dynamics are reproduced in a digital divide, differentiated into first, second, and third levels divides based on access, skills and usage, and outcomes and benefits. Online shopping resides at the cross-current between these strata: consumers require basic access and intermediate digital skills as well as they need to be sufficiently endowed with socio-economic means to engage in this kind of activity and to translate online participation into meaningful benefits.

This paper is a systematic literature review on Social Stratification and Digital Divide- How Socioeconomic Identity influences online shopping behavior across class groups. Drawing on the premise of digital stratification, it examines how consideration of socioeconomic identity - how people see themselves and understand their class position - informs their engagement with online shopping. Instead of reporting primary research findings, the article integrates research findings from sociology, information systems and marketing to highlight patterns, contradictions and areas where further work is needed.

2. Conceptual Background

Social stratification is concerned with the ranking of people and groups on the basis of material and social resources and power, which are generally measured by income, education and occupation. The position of class influences not only one's material conditions of living but also one's access to information, networks and cultural capital that are factors shaping decisions of consumption and lifestyle.

Socioeconomic identity is more than an objective status, as it includes how one sees oneself relative to "people like us" and "people like them" along dimensions of status, legitimacy, and social-group membership. A pair of people with similar incomes could have very different socioeconomic identities, shaped by who they compare themselves to, what they aspire to, and how much respect or stigma they feel. This informs what we deem to be acceptable, safe or "for someone like me," all of which take place in digital spheres too," he explained.

Early digital divide research concentrated on access to the who has or does not have access to the Internet and to computing devices. Subsequent research has introduced second-level divides regarding digital skills and types of online activities, and third-level divides referring to outcomes including employment possibilities or political engagement. New research suggests that the digital divide is increasingly based on access to capabilities and benefits, not just on simple access to technology. Online shopping fits well into this model.

3. Methodology of the Review

The present review is a thematic, systematic, and narrative review, which allows us to combine the rigour of structured searching with the interpretivism of narrative synthesis. Studies were identified by keyword searches including digital divide, digital inequality, online shopping behaviour, and e-commerce, as well as terms related to socio-economic status and online buying behaviour, across a range of databases and open repositories. A focus was placed on peer-reviewed journal articles and reports of substance from 2000 to 2025.

Included studies focused on the digital divide in consumption or online shopping; and/or investigated the relationship between socioeconomic status or class and participation in e-commerce; and/or were systematic reviews and/or major literature reviews on digital divide or digital inequality. A pure technical paper, which does not include any behavioural or sociological analysis, was rejected. Included studies were coded for four dimensions: the level(s) of digital divide addressed, the socioeconomic indicators employed, online shopping-related outcomes, and theoretical grounding.



4. Extended Review Tables

Table 1. Social Stratification, Digital Divide, and Online Consumption

No	Study	Context	Digital Divide Focus	Socioeconomic Variables	Key Findings on Online Behaviour	Relevance to Current Review
1	Nature Humanities & Social Sciences (2025) - "The impact of the second-level digital divide on residents' consumption"	984 residents in 15 Chinese counties and districts.	Second- and third-level divide (skills, outcomes). Digital literacy and access to digital credit.	Age, urban - rural location, education, and income.	Digital divide significantly inhibits consumption; narrowing the divide raises the probability of higher-level consumption. Impact stronger for rural residents and those over 50.	Shows that digital skills and financial access are stratified and affect consumption; underscores that class-linked factors shape who benefits from digital markets.
2	Cambridge Assessment (2025) - "Digital divide: A literature review"	Synthetic review of second- and third-level divides.	First-, second-, third-level digital divide; focus on skills and outcomes.	Education, socioeconomic status, age, and geography.	Identifies persistent inequalities in digital skills and benefits despite improving access; highlights the link between digital skills and educational attainment.	Provides a conceptual framework for the multi-level digital divide and emphasises the need to link divides to broader social inequalities.
3	Paraskevas et al. (2025) - "Bridging the Digital Divide in Online Retailing"	Retailers and regions with varying infrastructure and socioeconomic conditions.	Digital divide in online retail: infrastructural vs socioeconomic components.	Infrastructure indices, regional socioeconomic indicators.	Strategic focus on e-commerce fulfilment capabilities helps reduce the negative impact of the infrastructural divide; the socioeconomic divide remains more complex.	Shows that firm strategies can partially offset infrastructural inequality but that socioeconomic barriers require more nuanced, inclusive approaches.
4	"Digital divide - An impediment on a pathway to	Review of Indian digitalisation schemes and	Access and skills divides; rural -urban gaps; financial	Income, rural - urban residence, infrastructure, and digital	Highlights inadequate infrastructure, poor digital	Directly relevant to contexts like India, it



	sustainable development” (2023)	digital divide factors.	literacy.	skills.	skills, and lack of financial literacy as key factors limiting digital adoption and financial inclusion.	emphasises the intersection of socio-economic conditions and digital participation, including e-transactions.
5	“Inequality in the Digital World” (thesis, USA)	Pew Internet data (2000 - 2005) on US internet use.	Access and usage divides; everyday internet activities.	Age, gender, race, income, and education.	Finds persistent gaps in several online activities (including shopping) across demographic and socioeconomic groups, mirroring offline inequalities.	Demonstrates that online shopping is one of several digital activities stratified by class, race, and education; supports treating the digital divide as a reflection of broader stratification.
6	“Digital Inequality: E-Commerce Access and Its Implications”	Digital infrastructure and e-commerce performance across regions.	Digital inequality index (internet density, speed, logistics).	Regional development, poverty levels.	Internet density strongly correlated with online MSME presence; the digital inequality index reveals large gaps between developed and underdeveloped regions.	Shows that regional digital inequality shapes the availability and quality of online commerce, indirectly affecting consumer access and choices.

Table 2. Socioeconomic Status and Online Buying Behaviour

No	Study	Context	Socioeconomic Focus	Main Online Behaviour Measures	Key Findings	Relevance
7	“Impact of demographic factors on online buying behaviour”	General overview drawing on multiple empirical sources.	Income, age, and education are key determinants.	Online buying frequency, categories purchased, and risk perception.	Income plays a vital role; low-income individuals are more cautious due to lower	Highlights how economic status and age jointly shape risk attitudes and adoption of online



					tolerance for loss. Younger, more educated users show higher online engagement.	shopping.
8	“Impact of socio-economic factors on online shopping” (India)	Indian consumers: a study on socio-economic determinants.	Income, education, occupation, and family background.	Frequency of online shopping, preferred payment modes, and product types.	Finds that higher income and education are positively associated with online shopping, while lower socio-economic groups are more concerned about security and prefer cash-based options.	Directly links socio-economic factors to online shopping patterns in an emerging-market context.
9	“Relationship between socio-economic status and online buying...” (2024)	Digital marketing buyers for selected e-commerce firms.	Socioeconomic status (SES) and digital marketing exposure.	Online purchasing behaviour, responsiveness to promotions.	Shows that higher SES consumers respond more to digital marketing cues and engage more frequently in online purchases; lower SES consumers show cautious engagement.	Quantifies SES differences in online shopping intensity and responsiveness to digital campaigns.
10	“Socio-economic and e-marketing	Consumers are using e-marketing platforms.	Digital literacy, peer influence, and economic status.	Willingness to shop online, attitudes toward e-	Digital literacy and economic status are	Brings in sociocultural factors like peer networks



	determinants of online shopping” (2025)			marketing.	critical; peer influence moderates adoption, especially for lower-income consumers.	that interact with SES in shaping online behaviour.
11	“A Study on Online Shopping Behaviour in Rural Areas” (India)	Rural consumers in India.	Income, rural infrastructure, payment preferences.	Adoption of online shopping, payment choice (e.g., COD).	Flexible payment options such as cash-on-delivery significantly increase rural consumers’ acceptance of online shopping; infrastructural and trust issues remain.	Illustrates how infrastructural and financial constraints interact with rural class conditions to shape online adoption.

5. Thematic Findings

Digital divide as a layered expression of stratification: access gaps are narrowing in many contexts, but inequalities in skills, confidence, and outcomes persist and are closely linked to education, income, and geography. In some cases, the second- and third-level divides now matter more for consumption than raw access: individuals may have internet access but lack the skills or trust to use online shopping effectively.

Socioeconomic status and risk/trust in online shopping: income and education influence not only the likelihood of shopping online but also perceptions of risk and trust. Lower-income consumers often have less buffer against financial loss, making them more wary of online fraud, product misrepresentation, or payment failures. As a result, they may prefer cash-on-delivery, maintain smaller basket sizes, or restrict online purchases to low-risk categories.

Socioeconomic identity and perceptions of online channels: how consumers see themselves, such as “small town, middle class,” “struggling worker,” or “urban professional”, shapes expectations of appropriate shopping channels and brands. These identity-laden perceptions help explain why SES effects on online behaviour are not purely economic.

Role of infrastructure and corporate strategy: poor internet density, slow speeds, or limited logistics infrastructure restrict the availability and quality of online services. Retail strategies that focus on omnichannel fulfilment and flexible options can mitigate some infrastructural divides, but they do not fully overcome socioeconomic barriers such as low digital literacy and mistrust.

6. Discussion: Socioeconomic Identity as the Missing Link

The reviewed literature demonstrates strong links between socioeconomic factors and online shopping behaviour, yet most studies treat SES as a set of demographic indicators rather than as a lived identity. Digital divide work emphasises access and skills; e-commerce research emphasises income, education, and perceived risk, but few studies explicitly theorise socioeconomic identity as a mediating mechanism.



A sociological lens suggests that socioeconomic identity shapes risk tolerance and trust in online environments beyond objective income. Class-based identities influence perceptions of which channels and brands are “for us,” affecting both adoption and satisfaction. Digital divides are therefore not just technological gaps but social boundaries that reflect and reinforce class distinctions.

7. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Most studies use SES as a control variable but do not measure or theorise socioeconomic identity as a construct. Future research should develop scales that capture how people see their class position and how this shapes their online behaviour.

More work is needed on how digital skills and usage patterns affect the quality of online consumption and how these vary across class groups. Comparative studies across countries and between urban and rural settings can clarify how different configurations of infrastructure, policy, and class structures shape digital stratification in consumption.

Longitudinal work could track how socioeconomic identity and digital competences co-evolve and how this affects online shopping over time. Future studies should also examine how class intersects with gender, age, caste/ethnicity, and region to produce specific patterns of digital inclusion or exclusion.

II. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has examined how social stratification and the digital divide intersect to shape online shopping behaviour across class groups. It shows that digital inequalities in access, skills, and benefits mirror and deepen existing class hierarchies, and that socioeconomic status strongly influences how consumers engage with e-commerce, perceive risk, and evaluate online channels.

The review argues that to fully understand these patterns, researchers must move beyond simple SES indicators and take the notion of socioeconomic identity seriously, how individuals interpret and perform their class position in digital spaces. Such a perspective can bridge macro-level structural inequalities and micro-level consumer decisions, offering a richer understanding of digital consumption in stratified societies.

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