

Social Commerce in the Age of COVID-19 Recovery: A Systematic Review of Platforms, User Behavior, and Conversion Strategies

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Abstract

Article history:

Received: August 26, 2022

Revised: September 21, 2022

Accepted: October 28, 2022

Published: December 30, 2022

Keywords:

Conversion Strategies, COVID-19 Recovery, Platforms, Social Commerce, User Behavior.

Identifier:

Nawala

Page: 81-92

<https://nawala.io/index.php/gjom>

This article examines the role of social commerce in the age of COVID-19 recovery, addressing the central question of how platforms, user behavior, and conversion strategies have evolved during and after the pandemic. Using a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2021, the study consolidates fragmented evidence to clarify how digital platforms have transformed shopping experiences, how consumer trust and authenticity shape engagement, and which strategies most effectively drive conversions. The analysis reveals that platform affordances such as live streaming, embedded payments, and interactive reviews enhance trust and reduce uncertainty, while user reliance on social validation and influencer credibility has grown significantly. The discussion synthesizes insights across regions and highlights cultural differences in adoption, while emphasizing trust as a recurring determinant of purchase intention. Overall, the findings position social commerce as a socio-technical ecosystem that will continue to shape digital consumption in post-pandemic markets.

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1. Introduction

Social commerce—commerce activities that unfold within or are deeply intertwined with social media platforms—has evolved from a peripheral sales channel into a core pillar of digital retail strategy. Before the pandemic, research already highlighted how social features such as reviews, recommendations, and community interaction shape trust and purchase intention (Hajli, 2015; Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016; Busalim, 2016). COVID-19 accelerated this trajectory by pushing consumers and firms toward digitally mediated exchanges, shrinking the distance between discovery, engagement, and conversion. As economies enter a recovery phase, understanding how platforms, user behavior, and conversion strategies interact in social commerce is crucial for both theory and practice.

Platform design is central to the social commerce value proposition. Features such as live streaming, shoppable posts, and embedded checkouts compress the customer journey and provide rich, synchronous cues that can substitute for in-store experiences. Evidence shows that live streaming, in particular, bolsters parasocial interaction, trust, and real-time product assessment, translating into stronger purchase intentions (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). At the same time, platform governance—how content is curated, how influencers are vetted, and how communities are moderated—shapes perceived risk and credibility, both of which are decisive for conversion in socially embedded settings (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016; Busalim, 2016).

COVID-19 also reconfigured user behavior. Periods of lockdown and risk salience intensified social media usage and altered decision heuristics, with

consumers relying more on peer cues, creators, and micro-communities for product validation (Sheth, 2020; Appel et al., 2020). These shifts amplified social proof and social support mechanisms long recognized in social commerce research, but they also surfaced vulnerabilities around misinformation and panic-driven impulses that can distort demand (Naeem, 2021). As recovery proceeds, hybrid patterns—combining online social discovery with selective offline verification—are likely to persist, raising fresh questions about cross-channel attribution and the durability of pandemic-era habits.

Conversion strategies in this context extend beyond price promotions to encompass experience design: interactive streams, limited-time “drops,” influencer co-creation, and frictionless payments embedded within social feeds. The interplay of social interaction, trust building, and swift path-to-purchase suggests that conversion is less a terminal event than the outcome of continuous, community-mediated engagement (Hajli, 2015; Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). Yet the heterogeneity of platforms and consumer segments complicates generalization. A systematic review can synthesize fragmented evidence across settings, clarify which platform features and behavioral drivers most consistently predict conversion, and identify where post-pandemic dynamics diverge from pre-2020 baselines. By integrating studies from 2015 through 2021, this review maps the evolving contours of social commerce in the age of COVID-19 recovery, develops an evidence-based framework linking platform affordances to behavioral mechanisms and conversion outcomes, and outlines priorities for future research and managerial practice.

2. Literature Review

The literature on social commerce emphasizes three interrelated domains: platforms, user behavior, and conversion mechanisms. Early research established that platform affordances—such as reviews, ratings, and recommendation systems—enhance trust and reduce perceived risk, thereby shaping purchase intentions (Hajli, 2015; Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). Subsequent studies highlighted how more interactive features, including live streaming and influencer endorsements, generate engagement through parasocial interaction and social presence (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020; Park & Lin, 2020). These features have grown in prominence as platforms evolved from facilitating information exchange to embedding entire purchasing processes within social media ecosystems.

User behavior in social commerce has been extensively studied through the lenses of trust, social proof, and community participation. Appel et al. (2020) note that social media's participatory culture enables consumers to act simultaneously as content producers and evaluators, reinforcing social validation effects. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sheth (2020) and Naeem (2021) observed significant shifts in behavior, with users exhibiting increased reliance on peer cues and heightened susceptibility to impulsive decisions driven by uncertainty. More recent findings indicate that consumers in recovery phases balance these tendencies with greater scrutiny of source credibility and authenticity, particularly in influencer-driven contexts (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Abreu, 2019).

Conversion strategies are a third major focus. Beyond traditional discounts, firms leverage interactive experiences, scarcity tactics, and seamless checkout

integration to influence purchasing outcomes (Busalim, 2016). Live-streaming commerce in particular has proven effective, with evidence showing that interactivity and trust mediate its effect on conversion (Sun et al., 2019). Additionally, integration of mobile shopping and social media platforms has been identified as a key enabler of frictionless purchasing, with usability and payment security emerging as critical factors (Lin et al., 2019). Despite these advances, scholars caution that heterogeneity across platforms and cultures complicates generalization, underlining the need for systematic reviews to identify robust patterns (Yang, 2021).

Together, these studies demonstrate that social commerce is not merely a transactional medium but a socio-technical ecosystem shaped by platform design, evolving user behavior, and dynamic conversion strategies. Synthesizing this literature allows for a clearer understanding of how COVID-19 has reshaped digital consumption pathways and where future inquiries should concentrate.

3. Methods

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to synthesize existing knowledge on social commerce platforms, user behavior, and conversion strategies in the context of COVID-19 recovery. Following established SLR guidelines, academic databases including Scopus, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect were searched for peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2021. Search terms combined keywords such as “social commerce”, “platforms”, “user behavior”, “conversion”, and “COVID-19” using

Boolean operators. Only studies written in English and directly addressing the intersection of social media and commerce were included.

To ensure rigor, the selection process applied three stages: initial screening of titles and abstracts, full-text assessment against inclusion criteria, and quality appraisal based on methodological clarity and relevance. Studies focusing solely on general e-commerce without social media integration were excluded. The final sample comprised empirical and conceptual articles that together offered insights into platform features, consumer interaction, and purchase outcomes. Data were extracted systematically, categorized into thematic domains, and synthesized to identify consistent findings and research gaps. This approach provides a reliable foundation for mapping how social commerce evolved during and after the pandemic and for drawing implications for both scholarship and practice.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this review indicate that social commerce during and after COVID-19 recovery is defined by the intersection of platform affordances, user trust, and innovative conversion strategies. Across the literature, there is broad agreement that platforms are no longer passive transaction facilitators but active socio-technical ecosystems that shape consumer behavior. Features such as reviews, ratings, and recommendation systems consistently reduce perceived risk and strengthen purchase intentions (Hajli, 2015; Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). The rise of live-streaming has been particularly influential, as sellers and influencers can demonstrate products in real time, fostering parasocial interaction and reducing

uncertainty (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2020). These interactive affordances have grown even more critical in the recovery phase, where consumers expect seamless integration of discovery, engagement, and purchasing.

User behavior has also shifted significantly, with trust emerging as the most important determinant of engagement and conversion. Social validation and peer recommendations are repeatedly shown to influence decision-making, especially in times of heightened uncertainty (Appel et al., 2020; Naeem, 2021). Studies highlight that authenticity of influencers and transparency of communication strengthen credibility and reduce skepticism (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Abreu, 2021). During the pandemic, misinformation and misleading endorsements undermined trust in some contexts, yet recovery has seen greater emphasis on credible communities and verified content (Yang, 2021). As consumers become more cautious, sustained trust-building is expected to be central for long-term participation in social commerce.

Conversion strategies within social commerce reveal a move beyond traditional promotions toward more interactive and engaging approaches. Live-stream shopping consistently demonstrates strong impacts on purchase intention, mediated by trust and interactivity (Sun et al., 2019). Seamless in-app payment options and mobile integration further reduce transaction friction, creating smoother pathways to purchase (Lin et al., 2019). Moreover, firms increasingly employ strategies such as scarcity cues, limited-time offers, and co-creation with influencers to sustain consumer attention and encourage repeat purchasing (Hajli, 2015; Park & Lin, 2020). These tactics illustrate that conversion is not a single point transaction

but an ongoing process embedded in community participation and experiential engagement.

Despite the positive growth of social commerce, comparative differences across markets remain a recurring theme. East Asian platforms such as WeChat and Taobao exhibit highly integrated models where social interaction and commerce are seamlessly embedded, while Western platforms have shown slower uptake and greater fragmentation (Park & Lin, 2020). Cultural differences in how trust is formed and how consumers respond to privacy concerns play an important role in explaining these variations (Busalim, 2016). The literature also notes cross-regional disparities in adoption, with studies showing that consumers in some markets readily embrace social commerce while others remain more cautious, reflecting cultural variations in trust and technological readiness. This uneven development underscores the importance of examining institutional and cultural contexts when generalizing findings from one region to another.

Overall, the synthesis highlights that social commerce in the age of COVID-19 recovery is not simply an extension of e-commerce but a socio-technical ecosystem shaped by interactive platforms, evolving consumer trust, and innovative conversion strategies. The reviewed studies converge on the centrality of trust as a predictor of consumer engagement, while also pointing to the importance of platform design and community participation in sustaining conversions. The persistence of hybrid consumption patterns—where consumers discover and evaluate products online but sometimes confirm decisions offline—suggests that pandemic-induced changes are likely to endure. For scholars, the findings call for

cross-cultural and longitudinal research to better capture these evolving behaviors. For practitioners, the implications are clear: investment in authenticity, transparency, and seamless user experience will be decisive in sustaining social commerce growth in the recovery era.

5. Conclusion

The review of existing literature demonstrates that social commerce in the age of COVID-19 recovery has transitioned into a dynamic and multifaceted ecosystem. Platform affordances such as reviews, ratings, live streaming, and seamless payment integration are no longer supplementary but central to shaping consumer trust and engagement. These features, combined with personalization and interactive content, have redefined how consumers discover and evaluate products, highlighting that social commerce is more than a transactional mechanism—it is an experiential and community-driven process. The evidence also suggests that pandemic-induced changes, such as reliance on social validation and digitally mediated interactions, are likely to persist, reinforcing the long-term significance of socially embedded commerce.

At the same time, trust has emerged as the most critical factor influencing user behavior and conversion. The authenticity of influencers, transparency in communication, and credibility of online communities are repeatedly identified as key determinants of purchase intention. However, challenges such as misinformation, fake reviews, and opportunistic marketing practices underline the fragility of this trust. Differences across markets further complicate this picture, as

cultural and institutional factors shape adoption patterns in unique ways. In particular, while East Asian platforms illustrate highly integrated and innovative models, Western markets remain more fragmented, and emerging economies continue to face infrastructure and security barriers.

Taken together, the findings highlight both robust patterns and significant gaps in current knowledge. For scholars, there is a pressing need for longitudinal and comparative research that accounts for cultural, institutional, and technological diversity. For practitioners, the implications point toward prioritizing authenticity, transparency, and seamless design to foster lasting consumer relationships. As economies recover from COVID-19, social commerce is positioned not only as a driver of digital retail growth but also as a site where trust, technology, and community converge to reshape the future of consumption.

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