

*Conceptual Paper*

## Functionalities of Social Commerce used by SME during Pandemic

Konstantinos Madias \*  
Andrzej Szymkowiak \*\*

DOI: <https://doi.org/1054663/2182-9306.sn1.30-44>

### ABSTRACT

Due to Covid-19 and to the lockdown enterprises are trying to find ways to continuously sell and promote their products even if their physical shops are closed. Online shopping has been increasing during the pandemic which helps enterprises to remain profitable. Social media are used as e-commerce channels from small and medium enterprises due to the lack of time, budget, and to their useful functionalities. This paper is addressing social commerce functionalities that are used from enterprises in order to remain competitive in the market during the lockdown. In this paper these functionalities are been evaluated and examined in order to find their advantages and disadvantages. The results of this evaluation were that the functionalities of social commerce can benefit SME during pandemic as they don't demand physical contact which is mostly prohibited during pandemic, they are affordable, they don't need much time to be implemented, and also the audience is already gathered and active on social media. However, enterprises should choose the most suitable function for them based on their product and their audience. Social commerce is proven to be useful as a selling channel to small and medium enterprises during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Social commerce, lockdown, Covid-19, social media functionalities

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\* The Poznan University of Economics and Business, Poland. E-Mail: [konstantinos.a.madias@gmail.com](mailto:konstantinos.a.madias@gmail.com)

\*\* The Poznan University of Economics and Business, Poland. E-Mail: [andrzej.szymkowiak@ue.poznan.pl](mailto:andrzej.szymkowiak@ue.poznan.pl)

**Received on:** 2020/10/06

**Approved on:** 2021/12/07

Evaluated by a double blind review system

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Pandemics have been an issue of discussion for many years as they have plagued many generations and they cannot be prevented as they are a recurring biological phenomenon (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Past research has shown that pandemics occur every 10 to 50 years as a result of the introduction of a new virus or subtypes of a virus to the human population (Potter, 2001). The increase of the global population and the need to live closer to animals is increasing the possibility of a new virus to transfer to humans through animals. These viruses are called zoonotic diseases and require direct contact with an infected animal to be transferred, some examples of zoonotic diseases are yellow fever or Zika, which are transmitted through mosquito bite (Al-Qahtani et al., 2016). Preventing a pandemic is a matter of society as a whole. Some main solutions of preventing the spread of a virus is by avoiding potentially infected people, by following proper hygiene practices, or by communicating with the citizens about the measure they have to take to avoid the spread of the virus. Societies should adapt and act quickly to the changes of a pandemic. Additionally, as the global economy is also directly affected enterprises should take some action to survive through the pandemic. Thus, past pandemics should be analysed and evaluated to follow an effective recovery strategy.

Since 2019 the global population is facing an ongoing virus named Coronavirus 2 (COVID-19). COVID-19 is a virus that is affecting the global public health sector while infecting a large number of people. This virus in a matter of weeks is threatening the lives of millions worldwide, as of August 11 of 2020, WHO confirmed 19.936.210 bases of Covid-19 worldwide and 732.499 death victims (WHO, 2020). Even though the world is in going through a pandemic there is no estimation about its long-term effects on other sectors. To be more precise, current knowledge and previous experience

resulting from past pandemics make it impossible to determine its effects but only allow the analysis of various scenarios. This applies to economic, legal, social, and technological dimensions.

During the previous pandemics, many researches have been conducted in regards to the worldwide consequences of a pandemic. To be more precise, past research was associated with the investigation of low returns on assets (Jordà et al., 2020), another research has been focusing on behavioural changes related to pandemic (Funk et al., 2009). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has also impact on many businesses. It is noticeable that many businesses are facing short and long terms issues due to worldwide lockdown. The lockdown is an adoption of a strict measure to prevent the spread of the virus by increasing social distancing, decreasing the functioning of the enterprises, and by adding personal protective measures such as masks and gloves (Vinceti et al., 2020). Thus businesses are forced to implement changes in the way they operate which results in companies freezing their hiring processes, businesses prioritizing their cost structure and lastly, many business sectors trying to find new solutions that can guarantee their position in the market (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). At the same time, the digital business field such as online entertainment, online shopping, and online communication have noticed an unprecedented growth which is the result of the reduction of face-to-face contact (Dannenberg et al., 2020). As lockdown is being adopted for the protection of individuals, retailers are not operating and costumers are not able to purchase products. This situation resulted in an increased activity from both sides upon the online application related to consuming. The rise of online users during the lockdown can be explained by the extra time that users spend in their houses and their need to communicate by the use of social media, the need to entertain themselves and to purchase products made the online wholesale a trend during the pandemic (Hasanat et al., 2020).

This research paper is focused on how businesses are adjusting their social media usage to achieve better profits during the pandemic. In order to achieve the above we separated our paper into two parts. The first part focuses on how businesses are using social media and what is their aim based on the literature. The methodology we followed in order to concentrate the main social media uses was an intentional literature review, which could also be defined as snowball method. To be more precise, we used available articles from the Elsevier, Emerald, Willey, JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar,

and ResearchGate databases. The selection of these articles was based on the degree that their research subject is connected to our research goal. In addition, their publication year varies from 1996 to 2019; past researches were mostly used for withdrawing important definitions such as “e-commerce”. The definitions that we obtained from past researches are still valid and commonly used in current researches. The second part, focuses on social commerce usage by small and medium enterprises during COVID-19. In this part we examined the most common practices of social commerce during pandemic. Additionally, we analyze the main functionalities of social commerce in order to indicate the disadvantages and the advantages of each social commerce practice. The criteria for selecting these functionalities, was first of all, that they are not limited to any users; both individuals and SME have access to them. Another criterion is that these functionalities are provided to users in order to communicate with others, thus can be used from enterprises in order to get in touch with their clients. By doing so the research gap on how COVID-19 is affecting businesses will be narrowed down. To be more precise, even though there is extensive research on the economic consequences of a pandemic there is a distinct lack of research on the specific topic. Such a dearth of research on the way that businesses using social media as social commerce channels is needed to be covered to understand the way that businesses can sustain their market position during a pandemic. Moreover, this indicates the need to analyze how businesses are taking advantage of social media during periods that consumers are not capable of doing in-store shopping.

## **2. BASIC PURPOSE OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE BY BUSINESSES**

In regards to the later, many industries have been affected by the social media revolution. Social media have been equated mostly with information sharing and knowledge production, as a result, businesses cannot ignore the power and the potential of social media (Zanoni et al., 2014). Social media are applied based on web 2.0 which allows users to upload their content. Social media allows the convention of messages and the interaction among a high number of individuals (Tarigan & Tritama, 2016). Additionally, Kapoor (2018) defines social media as “communication websites that facilitate relationship forming between users from diverse backgrounds, resulting in a rich social structure” (p.1). One of the primary uses of social media by organizations is to communicate with the customers and the public, for instance such communication

can be aspects as promotion, branding, and advertising (Zanoni et al., 2014). Additionally, as this paper will be focused on social commerce and e-commerce as a way of promotion of SME it is beneficial to define them. One of the main definitions of e-commerce is by Zwass (1996) “Electronic commerce (E-commerce) is the sharing of business information, maintaining business relationships, and conducting business transactions by means of telecommunications networks.” (p.3). Chesher and Kaura (1998) defined e-commerce as the interactions between communications systems, data management systems and security which because of these interaction the information about available products or services becomes available. As far as social commerce is considered as an Internet-based commercial application designed to assist consumers either with their decision making process or with their acquisition of products and services within online marketplaces and communities (Garczarek-Bąk & Szymkowiak, 2018). Another definition found about social commerce is by Liang and Turban (2011) who define it in a simpler way as the delivery of e-commerce activities and functionalities into a social media environment.

Taken together, promotion is the communication between the consumer and the company to influence their decision-making process (Subramanian, 2017). Social media are used to effectively promote a company’s product as they are used throughout the world and they contain a big number of everyday users (Chianasta & Wijaya, 2013). Social media have a lot of capabilities that can be beneficial for the promotion activities of a business. To be more precise, visuals and content are crucial for promoting your business as social media are based on visuals. As almost all users can create compelling content and target wide audience businesses should focus on how to create unique content that will attract customers on their profile. Regarding the content, your audience may also start creating content about your brand (User-generated content, UGC). UGC can be used by the brand which can be beneficial to the business as it showcases an active interaction with the followers which is important in creating trust and it also influences the consumers’ purchase decisions. Additionally, social media offer hashtags that are useful for the brands. An example of the above comes from Twitter where brands can identify the most trending topics by the usage of hashtags and start a discussion that will raise awareness on their brand. Social media can also be used as a promotion tool for the brand’s e-commerce platform, for example, by posting about a special promotion on Instagram it can bring consumers to the website through the post.

Additionally, many brands are using influencers to promote their products or special offers to the audience. Influencers have a big number of followers so by choosing an influencer who fits with the identity of the brand it will increase the presence in the audience that the brand wants to target. Companies are using mostly Facebook for promoting their products due to the high number of active users. In regards to the above, companies are using Facebook as a promotion tool due to two main advantages of the platform, first of all, the affordability to promote a product and secondly the usability of targeting consumers based on their interests (Chianasta & Wijaya, 2013).

Effective social media advertising is another aim of why companies are using social media platforms. In this sense, traditional advertising is becoming less and less effective in comparison with social media advertising (Duffett, 2015). Past research has noted that social media advertising is considered as more interesting as it provides the customers with advice, experience sharing, quick and little-effort information search (Patino et al., 2012). In regards to that, more and more companies are investing in social media advertising. As reported by Socialbakers (2020) companies spendings for digital ads was 56.2% higher at the end of 2020 compared to the end of 2019, that could be explained by having in mind that companies spend more into digital channels in order to reach people at home as most of them were lockdown in their homes. Facebook, is a great platform to advertise your products as it has more than 2 billion monthly uses, additionally Facebook ads are mostly used as a converting landing page which offers a variety of free lead magnet, the more common Facebook advertisements consist of limited-time offers, giveaways, and free shipping. Instagram, can also be used for social media advertising as it has a growing number of active users. Instagram advertisements can be used as direct links to the product's page or another landing page to allow the user to engage with the product. Pinterest is also used as an advertising channel from businesses. Pinterest is widely considered as an e-commerce social media as users use the platform to find and sometimes also purchase creative products that they are interested in (Warren, 2019).

In addition to the above, companies are also using social media as a sales channel. Nowadays, social media have capabilities that allow customers to purchase products through the application or by communicating with the retailer (Lindsey-Mullikin & Borin, 2017). For instance, Facebook allows users to buy products without directing them on a different e-commerce site, Instagram introduced the shoppable posts, were

consumers can purchase the products they desire by the social media application.

### **3. PANDEMIC AND SOCIAL COMMERCE IN SOCIAL NETWORKS USAGE BY SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (SME)**

It is noted that social commerce market is on increase the last years, based on the data provided by Emarketer (2021) it is forecasted that in US retail social commerce sales will rise by 34.8% these years, also in 2020 it increases about 37.9%. Thus, as social commerce sales are on increase it means that SME can use it for their own benefits. Some of these ways will be presented below.

Past researches have presented the benefits of social commerce. To be more precise, social commerce, except the most obvious benefit which is the price (Han et al., 2018), it can boost the brand awareness, increase the profits, maintain a customer relationship and bring more business opportunities (Chow & Shi, 2014). Moreover, past researches also presented empirically how social commerce is beneficial to SME. For example, Stelzner (2015) came out with the results that 89% of marketers mentioned that the main benefit of e-commerce is actually the increased exposure that is provided by social platforms. Harvard Business Review (2011) presented also that 87% of the customers mention that social-commerce in social networking site helps them decide which can be translated as a major advantage for SME that use social-commerce as their main platform of selling products or services.

Furthermore, as Covid-19 is spreading and the lockdown is continuing businesses are trying to find ways to survive during the pandemic. At the same time, consumers due to the lockdown turn to online and mobile shopping to purchase their necessities (Willinger, 2020). Taking that under consideration, organizations are using applications and social media to enhance their online shopping capabilities and correspond in the times of the Covid-19 (Mohammad Waliul Hasanat et al., 2020). Having said that, despite the purposes of social media usage which were mentioned before, during the pandemic enterprises have to use social media as an additional marketing channel. To clarify, small and office enterprises during a lockdown have no time to adjust so going online and selling products online is the best option both for them but also for the customers who want to limit their exposure in public places. Social media functionalities are beneficial to small businesses as they do not have enough time and budget to adapt and create e-commerce sites or to find ways to increase their traffic.

Additionally, to create a profitable e-commerce page small and office enterprise need time and budget for the promotion tools of the page, however, in case of social media, there is no need to search for an audience. Social media offer a place that customers already exist and the businesses have to find ways to attract them to their page. Regarding the above, businesses want to maintain their sales high to survive during the pandemic. Some businesses have found ways to adjust their social media usage so as to benefit from them effectively and efficiently. To be more precise, using traditional social media marketing techniques will not benefit the enterprises as they require time and budget, so enterprises have to find ways to use social media in order to minimize the required time for promoting the product at no cost. In this paper, four functionalities of Facebook were examined. The examples of functionalities that will be described below are unpaid social media ways of selling products.

First of all, Facebook groups are a good way to communicate and promote your products. Small and medium enterprises may not have a significant amount of people who like their Facebook fan page so their promotion posts will not reach enough customers. On the other hand, Facebook groups are pages on Facebook where the members are people who are connected cause of a specific topic. For instance, they may be connected cause of the location, interests, or lifestyle. Thus, the audience is gathered and segmented in Facebook groups and enterprises can target these groups based on the customers they want to promote their product. After joining a Facebook group which consists of the audience which fits the product the enterprise can directly promote their product to them; if it is allowed by the terms and policies of the group. Retailers and small businesses are using specific Facebook groups based on their target audience and they publish posts about their product and how the end customer can purchase them. That way the customers are able to reach out to the sellers and order directly from Facebook. Consumers additionally are not exposed to crowded places so the virus risk is lower than going to the supermarket. Additionally, the business owners can keep selling their products even during a pandemic without an e-commerce site, or even without using social media advertisements for their products. However, posts on Facebook groups have a time limit, to more precise, as the members keep posting the promotion post of the enterprise will not appear as the first post on the page.

The second Facebook functionality is Live Streaming. To be more precise, small businesses introduced Live Streaming on their Facebook profile to showcase their



products to their consumers. During the Live Streaming, the sellers are interacting with the customers so there is no need for e-commerce as the consumers can order by commenting on the Live Stream chat window and ask their questions without having to visit the shop. Moreover, the employees can try the clothes so as to show to the consumer how the clothes are fitting. Thus, during the Live Streaming, the businesses have the opportunity to showcase their social media and inform the consumers about the next time that they will be live. However, as with Facebook groups, there is a time limit in this functionality as well, if customers are not well-informed about the time and the date of the Live then there is a high probability of lack of audience during the Livestreaming. The solution for the time limit of the above functionalities is the marketplace by Facebook.

People during the pandemic were selling their products through the marketplace, and more importantly, businesses were using the marketplace as their e-commerce website. Additionally, the marketplace gives the chance to businesses to target their audience and specify all the details that are needed by the customer. Moreover, the marketplace of Facebook allows the sellers to keep their posts about the product that they want to sell for a long time online, and the customers can search exactly what they are looking for. Furthermore, the consumers don't have to go to crowded places or shopping malls to purchase their products, and businesses even if there is lockdown, they can keep selling their products.

One more example of unpaid social media usage during the pandemic is the recommendations. Enterprises and small sellers are trying to engage with the customers to be recommended to other customers. To be clearer, sellers are asking customers in case they are satisfied to recommend them to their friends, in order to increase their presence in social media without paid advertisement. The word of mouth is very beneficial for the sellers as it is an affordable way for them to advertise their products but also it is an efficient and effective way to promote other social media selling activities with new customers.

**Table1.** Pros and cons of various Facebook functionalities as social commerce sitePros and cons of various

<b>SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE</b>	<b>ADVANTAGES</b>	<b>DISADVANTAGES</b>
<b>Facebook groups</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Targeted audience;</li> <li>- Many members in one group;</li> <li>- The ability to interact with users.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited preference for purchases by users;</li> <li>- Detailed communication for more details;</li> <li>- The post will be ignored based on the group activity</li> <li>- Time life of post.</li> </ul>
<b>Marketplace</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Target by location, product or category;</li> <li>- Significant amount of active users;</li> <li>- Functional and easy to use by enterprises;</li> <li>- No time limit of the post;</li> <li>- Longer lifetime of offers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not personalized for the business;</li> <li>- Limited preference for using marketplace;</li> <li>- Requires action from the user to search the marketplace.</li> </ul>
<b>LiveStream</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Easy to coordinate by the enterprise;</li> <li>- Users feel safe with their purchases so they do not hesitate of doing it again;</li> <li>- Live interaction and the ability to refer to questions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More details have to be provided to the customers about how to purchase the products;</li> <li>- Have to be informed about the time of the Live;</li> <li>- Low post-airing attractiveness.</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Trustworthy as customers believe in the experiences of previous customers;</li> <li>- Affordable.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Need of high engagement with the customer;</li> <li>- Risk of not finding a customer to recommend the enterprise.</li> </ul>

Source: Own elaboration

After analyzing and evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of the above examples it is noticed that using social commerce during the pandemic can be beneficial for the small and medium enterprises. The main advantages are the fact that the referred social commerce examples can be implemented for free and they can be implemented in case of unexpected events without the need of time for the creation of a new strategy.

Furthermore, in this part, it will be beneficial to refer to some good practices of the social commerce functionalities. First of all, by referring to good practices we mean not practices that will produce effective results while implementing the social commerce functionalities that are mentioned above. Good practices of Livestreaming can be identified both as the technological advances that will improve the quality of the Live, for instance, the lighting, the quality of the image, the adjustment of the screen based on the devices that users participate in the Livestream, the ability to move the camera in order to show all the details of the clothing to the customers but also as a part of communication and interaction skills, such as the ability to respond to the comments while showing the products, sometimes a second employee maybe be needed for replying the comments and handling the camera while the other employee is showing the products.

Good practices in Facebook groups are the actual choice of the Facebook group that SME choose to post about their products. SME should have in mind to find groups with their target audience, active groups that people engage with the content, groups with high amount of audience, and also to follow the guidelines of the group as some Facebook groups don't allow advertisement posts. It is also a good practice to sustain a posting schedule in order not to be considered as "spam" but also not to be forgotten by the audience. Last but not least, being interactive with other posts inside the group and supporting other members is also a good practice that could lead to networking and a strong brand community.

The good practices of Marketplace are more connected with the functionalities of the Marketplace. To be more precise, SME should not only target the correct audience, but also categorize their product correctly. By doing so, customers will be able to find their product by searching for it. In addition, being detailed with the information about the product, the delivery process but also the payment process is something that most customers look for and SME should pay attention to.

Recommendations have also some good practices that SME could follow. For instance,

when asking a satisfied customer to recommend the product on their social media platforms it would be a good practice to give them a discount in case they do so. That way they will be more motivated the next time to do it without asking. In addition, communicating with the customers and asking if they are satisfied and if they can recommend your product may build a stronger relationship between the seller and the buyer. Having said that, another good practice is to engage to an honest communication with the clients.

As in every selling-marketing strategy or technique there are some main disadvantages and risk both for the sellers and for the customers. To be more precise, Bischoff (2020) presented that about half of the shoppers who purchased good online during the pandemic faced problems with parcel deliveries. That can be explained by mentioning the increase of social commerce sales which was caused by COVID-19. A lot of SME do not have the logistic capacity in order to take advantage of this increase and of the functionalities of social commerce. In addition, having dissatisfied customers due to delivery reasons it can affect the brand image which is exactly the opposite of what the goal of social commerce.

However, SME have to decide their strategies. There is a risk of lack of logistic capacity that may lead to dissatisfied customers but will lead to increasing profits or there is the option of avoiding the risk of social commerce but having the risk of no profits as physical stores remain closed during the lockdown. To sum up, SME should decide based on their costs-profits-risks but the functionalities of social commerce if used properly could result to the benefits that are mentioned above.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

During the pandemic, there is an increase of online shopping. To clarify, consumers are aware of the risk of crowded spaces and they are trying to minimize their visits to public spaces, at the same time, in many countries shops were forced to close for specific time period in order to avoid gatherings of people, this resulted in enterprises to seek out for new solutions to keep selling their products. As mentioned above, social media has been used as a selling channel for some enterprises due to their functionalities. Due to the lack of time and budget, small and medium enterprises started using social commerce functionalities in order to keep being profitable without cost and in a short period of time. To clarify, Covid-19 and the lockdown were two unexpected events, having said

that, businesses were not prepared on changing their strategies so social commerce was used as a solution as it provides the enterprises with functionalities that can be implemented without the need of excessive planning and organizing. Additionally, during the lockdown enterprises had decreased earnings as their shops were closed and they could not sell their products. As these two events were unexpected a lot of small and medium enterprises had not planned their budget according to the pandemic so they were not able to support changes on their strategy. Thus the main advantages that are noticeable through the above examples are the fact that businesses do not need to create e-commerce pages that need time and a high budget as it needs to be designed and promoted to attract customers, sellers do not need to spend money on paid advertisements that also requires a high budget and time so as to build a fanbase on their social media profiles, and businesses can still interact, engage, and sell their products to their customers. Enterprises, have to find their most suitable social commerce service in order to benefit from it. The product, the audience, and the engagement with the customers should be taken into account when deciding which usage of social commerce is the best option for the company. To conclude, using social e-commerce is proven to be useful for small and medium enterprises due to their affordable and not time-consuming functionalities.

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#### **How to cite this article:**

Madias, K. & Szymkowiak, A. (2022). Functionalities of Social Commerce used by SME during Pandemic, *International Journal of Marketing, Communication and New Media. Special Issue on Marketing in the Context of COVID-19*, January 2022, 30-44.