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Article

The Evolution and Impact of E-Commerce Live Streaming: From Media Convergence to Commercial Innovation

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Abstract: This study provides a comprehensive examination of e-commerce live streaming, tracing its evolution from the convergence of media technologies to its current status as a transformative force in global retail. The research reveals distinct development patterns across global markets, with China emerging as a mature ecosystem, Southeast Asia representing a high-growth emerging market, and Western markets remaining in nascent stages. The study further develops a dual classification system, identifying three streamer-based models (merchant-streaming, celebrity-streaming, and KOL-streaming) and two platform-based categories (e-commerce platform-integrated and social media platform-derived models). The findings highlight the complex interplay of cultural factors and consumer preferences in shaping the adoption and growth of this phenomenon, offering theoretical contributions to media convergence, digital retail transformation, and influencer marketing literature, while providing practical implications for platform operators, brands, streamers, and policymakers.

Keywords: e-commerce live streaming; media convergence; development patterns; typology

1. Introduction

The mass media landscape has undergone profound transformations with the advancement of electronic and wireless communication technologies. A distinctive feature of this evolution is the increasingly apparent functional and perceptual divergence between print and electronic media. Electronic media possess instantaneous information transmission capabilities that traditional print media lack, offering multi-sensory experiences through sound, visuals, and interactivity.

Among these media, radio, for instance, transmits information through airwaves with sound as the carrier, creating a strong sense of space and context. Television, as an audio-visual medium, combines sound transmission with visual reproduction, enabling vivid and graphic content delivery. The emergence of live streaming technology represents a significant milestone in this evolutionary trajectory. Live streaming is a form of interactive multimedia entertainment based on the Internet that retains the multi-sensory advantages of traditional electronic media while introducing unprecedented levels of interactivity and immediacy. This technological innovation has given rise to various applications across different domains, including online gaming, education industry, social interaction, and sports broadcasting [1]. Among these applications, e-commerce live streaming has emerged as a particularly impactful phenomenon, transforming traditional shopping models and enriching social media forms [2].

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This paper aims to provide a comprehensive examination of e-commerce live streaming by systematically analyzing its development trajectory, global market dynamics, and operational models. The study addresses three key research questions. First, it investigates how e-commerce live streaming has evolved from its inception to its current state. Second, it explores the distinctive patterns of development across different global markets. Third, it identifies the primary business models and typologies that characterize this emerging industry. By answering these questions, this research contributes to the understanding of how media convergence and technological innovation are reshaping commercial practices and consumer experiences in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *From Mass Media to Interactive Live Streaming*

The transition from traditional mass media to interactive digital platforms represents a fundamental shift in how information is produced, distributed, and consumed. Print media, characterized by physical distribution and delayed information transmission, has been increasingly complemented and, in some cases, supplanted by electronic media that offer real-time content delivery and enhanced sensory experiences. Radio and television, as early forms of electronic media, introduced immediacy and multi-sensory engagement that print media could not provide. However, these traditional electronic media remained largely one-directional in their communication flow, with limited opportunities for audience interaction.

The development of Internet technology has enabled the emergence of live streaming as a new media format that combines the immediacy of broadcast media with the interactivity of digital platforms. Live streaming allows for real-time content creation and consumption, creating a sense of liveness and co-presence that traditional media formats cannot replicate [3]. This technological advancement has facilitated the development of various live streaming applications across entertainment, education, and commerce domains [4,5].

2.2. *The Emergence of E-Commerce Live Streaming*

E-commerce live streaming represents the convergence of live streaming technology and online retail, creating a new business model that integrates entertainment, social interaction, and shopping [6]. The academic literature presents divergent views regarding the precise origin of this phenomenon. Scholarly research identifies 2016 as the inaugural year of e-commerce live streaming, with formal documentation on the MOGU platform [7]. However, alternative perspectives suggest that the phenomenon originated from the Double Eleven event on Taobao in 2017 [8].

This study endorses the view that e-commerce live streaming emerged no later than 2016, based on robust evidence from the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China [9]. The official report clearly states that the "E-commerce + live streaming" format accounted for 86.4% of total live streaming commerce sales in 2016, with a market size of approximately RMB 45.6 billion. This evidence provides strong support for the earlier emergence timeline.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, e-commerce live streaming experienced rapid development and widespread adoption. The disruption of offline retail operations created a critical need for alternative sales channels, leading to the adoption and expansion of e-commerce live streaming as a means for economic recovery and business continuity [10].

3. Global and Regional Development Patterns

3.1. *An Established Market*

While the global rise of e-commerce live streaming is well-documented, its adoption and growth have been geographically uneven. Scholarly and industry analyses commonly

distinguish between three primary regional models, defined by their distinct developmental timelines, market structures, and consumer behaviors.

China has emerged as the global leader in e-commerce live streaming, demonstrating remarkable growth and market maturity. The development trajectory in China can be characterized by rapid user adoption, substantial transaction volumes, and the emergence of a sophisticated ecosystem of platforms, streamers, and supporting services.

By the end of 2020, China had 388 million e-commerce live streaming users, accounting for 39.2% of the country's total Internet user population. This user base expanded dramatically within a two-year period, reaching 515 million users by December 2022, representing 48.2% of China's Internet users [11]. The scale of activity is equally impressive, with over 120 million live streaming sessions conducted on Chinese e-commerce platforms in 2022, involving nearly 1.1 million active e-commerce streamers [12].

The economic impact of e-commerce live streaming in China is substantial. In 2023, the sector's turnover reached RMB 4.9 trillion, with a growth rate of 35.2% [13]. These figures underscore the significance of e-commerce live streaming as a major driver of China's digital economy and retail transformation.

3.2. An Expanding Market

Southeast Asia represents a dynamic and rapidly expanding market for e-commerce live streaming globally. The region's e-commerce market is undergoing exceptional expansion. Industry projections indicate it is poised to triple in size, growing at a compound annual growth rate of 22% from 2022 to 2026, with an estimated value of approximately \$230 billion [14].

Consumer receptiveness to live streaming in Southeast Asia is particularly noteworthy. Research indicates that 82% of respondents in the region have accessed live streaming content, with 48% of users visiting live streaming platforms at least once a week [15]. More significantly, 63% of those who have ever purchased something through live streaming indicate strong engagement with this shopping format.

The success of TikTok Shop in Southeast Asia provides compelling evidence of the region's embrace of e-commerce live streaming. TikTok Shop, which utilizes live streaming as its primary commerce format, achieved explosive growth in the region, with its market share increasing from 4.4% in 2022 to approximately 13.2% in 2023 [16]. This rapid expansion demonstrates the platform's strong market competitiveness and the receptiveness of Southeast Asian consumers to live streaming commerce.

Malaysia exemplifies the significant rise of e-commerce live streaming in Southeast Asia. By the end of 2023, over one million Malaysians had registered as Shopee Live streamers, while more than 450,000 local sellers, influencers, and affiliates joined the platform [17]. User engagement metrics are equally impressive, with Malaysian consumers watching over 34 million hours of Shopee Live content and interacting with hosts 3.5 billion times [18]. The economic impact has been substantial, with 80,000 sellers experiencing a 25% annual revenue increase and livestream-driven orders growing by 500%. These developments highlight the immense potential of e-commerce live streaming in Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia.

3.3. Nascent Markets

In contrast to the rapid adoption in China and Southeast Asia, the United States and European markets have demonstrated slower development in e-commerce live streaming. In 2019, global live streaming commerce sales reached \$60 billion, but the contribution of the U.S. market was less than \$1 billion [19]. This disparity highlights the significant gap between Asian markets and Western markets in embracing this new commerce format. Besides, the concept of live streaming shopping has not yet been widely accepted by general consumers in Europe. Live streaming service providers such as Zellma and

Bambuser have noted that European companies require training to learn how to integrate e-commerce live streaming into their business operations [20]. This suggests that cultural factors and consumer preferences may contribute to the slower adoption in these markets.

The preceding analysis reveals a distinctly uneven global landscape for e-commerce live streaming. Rather than a uniform phenomenon, its development is segmented into leading, emerging, and nascent markets, each defined by unique trajectories. This fundamental disparity provides a crucial contextual framework for understanding how this business model manifests and evolves under different socioeconomic and cultural conditions.

4. Typology of E-Commerce Live Streaming

4.1. Classification Based on Streamer Types

The evolution of e-commerce live streaming has led to increasing diversification in its operational models, with scholars categorizing these models primarily based on streamer typology [21]. Three main categories have emerged, each with distinct characteristics.

Merchant-streaming involves enterprise-designated personnel promoting their proprietary brand products through live streaming. This model enables merchants to engage customers directly, reducing operational costs associated with traditional marketing channels. Merchant-streaming allows brands to maintain control over their messaging, product presentation, and customer interactions, while building direct relationships with consumers. This approach is particularly effective for brands seeking to establish authenticity and trust through direct engagement with their target audience.

Celebrity-streaming refers to public figures collaborating with multiple brands to merchandise diverse product lines. Celebrities leverage their fame, influence, and established fan bases to drive product sales through live streaming sessions. This model benefits from the parasocial relationships that celebrities have built with their audiences, creating a sense of trust and aspiration that can translate into purchase decisions. Celebrity-streaming often involves collaborations with major brands, generating significant media attention and consumer engagement.

KOL (Key Opinion Leader) live streaming typically features influencers in specific domains conducting live streaming sessions. Many KOLs initially establish their presence as ordinary individuals who subsequently gain viewers' loyalty through demonstrated professional competence and distinctive personal charisma. KOLs often specialize in particular product categories, building credibility through expertise and authentic content creation. This model relies on the establishment of trust-based relationships between the KOL and their followers, who value the influencer's recommendations and insights.

4.2. Classification Based on Platform Origins

An alternative classification system distinguishes e-commerce live streaming platforms based on their origins, identifying two primary categories with distinct characteristics and competitive advantages.

The e-commerce platform-integrated model refers to traditional e-commerce platforms that have integrated live streaming functionality to enhance sales conversion. Representative examples include Amazon Style Code Live and Taobao Live [22,23]. These platforms possess significant competitive advantages through their extensive user bases accumulated during their developmental phases, coupled with robust product portfolios and well-established supply chain systems that facilitate efficient live sales operations [24]. The integration of live streaming into existing e-commerce platforms creates a seamless shopping experience, allowing consumers to transition from browsing to purchasing without leaving the platform. This model benefits from pre-existing consumer trust in the platform's transaction security, product quality assurance, and customer service infrastructure.

The social media platform-derived model refers to social media platforms that have incorporated live streaming features to drive online product sales [25]. Prominent examples in this category include Facebook Live, TikTok Live, and YouTube Live. These platforms benefit from the presence of influential opinion leaders and internet celebrities who play pivotal roles in promoting e-commerce live streaming through product endorsements and personal shopping experience sharing. This promotional activity creates a commission-based revenue model where streamers earn significant income from viewer purchases made through their recommendations. Social media platforms leverage their strengths in content discovery, social interaction, and community building to create engaging shopping experiences that blend entertainment with commerce [26]. The social nature of these platforms facilitates word-of-mouth marketing and social validation, which can significantly influence purchase decisions.

4.3. Comparative Analysis of Classification Systems

The two classification systems, based on streamer types and platform origins, offer complementary perspectives on the e-commerce live streaming ecosystem. The streamer-based classification emphasizes the human element and the diverse roles that individuals play in driving commerce through live streaming. This perspective highlights the importance of trust, authenticity, and personal connection in the success of e-commerce live streaming. The platform-based classification, on the other hand, focuses on the technological and infrastructural foundations that enable e-commerce live streaming. This perspective highlights the strategic advantages leveraged by different types of platforms, rooted in their intrinsic strengths as either established e-commerce ecosystems or expansive social media networks.

Both classification systems reveal the dynamic and multifaceted nature of e-commerce live streaming, which involves complex interactions between content creators, platforms, brands, and viewers. The evolution of these models reflects ongoing experimentation and innovation in how live streaming technology can be leveraged for commercial purposes, with different approaches emerging to address specific market needs and consumer preferences.

5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

This study has provided a comprehensive examination of e-commerce live streaming, tracing its evolution from the convergence of media technologies to its current status as a transformative force in global retail. The research has revealed several key insights about this emerging phenomenon.

First, e-commerce live streaming represents a significant advancement in the evolution of mass media, combining the immediacy and multi-sensory engagement of electronic media with the interactivity and personalization of digital platforms. This convergence has created a new form of commercial communication that blends entertainment, social interaction, and shopping in ways that traditional media formats cannot replicate.

Second, the development of e-commerce live streaming has followed distinct patterns across global markets. China has emerged as the pioneer and market leader, with rapid user adoption, substantial transaction volumes, and a mature ecosystem of platforms and streamers. Southeast Asia represents a high-growth emerging market, characterized by strong consumer receptiveness and explosive platform growth, particularly in markets like Malaysia. In contrast, the United States and Europe have demonstrated slower adoption, suggesting that cultural factors and consumer preferences play crucial roles in shaping market development.

Third, the industry has evolved diverse operational models that can be categorized based on both streamer types and platform origins. Analysis based on streamer identity

reveals three predominant categories: merchant-streaming, celebrity-streaming, and KOL-streaming, each typified by distinct value propositions and audience relationship dynamics. The platform-based classification distinguishes between e-commerce platform-integrated model and social media platform-derived model, highlighting the different strategic advantages and competitive positions of these approaches.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to several theoretical domains. First, it advances our understanding of media convergence by demonstrating how live streaming technology has enabled the integration of entertainment, social interaction, and commerce in ways that transcend traditional media boundaries. The study shows how the evolution from broadcast media to interactive live streaming has created new possibilities for commercial communication and consumer engagement.

Second, the research contributes to the literature on digital retail transformation by documenting the emergence and growth of e-commerce live streaming as a distinct business model. The study provides empirical evidence of the scale and impact of this phenomenon, particularly in Asian markets, and offers a framework for understanding its operational models and market dynamics.

Third, the study contributes to the understanding of influencer marketing and social commerce by examining the roles of different types of streamers in driving commerce through live streaming. The research highlights the importance of trust, authenticity, and personal connection in the success of e-commerce live streaming, extending our understanding of how digital influencers create value in commercial contexts.

5.3. Practical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for various stakeholders in the e-commerce live streaming ecosystem.

For platform operators, the research underscores the importance of understanding market-specific factors that influence the adoption and growth of e-commerce live streaming. Platforms should consider local consumer preferences, cultural norms, and infrastructure conditions when designing their live streaming features and market strategies. The success of platforms like TikTok Shop in Southeast Asia demonstrates the potential for rapid growth in emerging markets that embrace this format.

For brands and merchants, the study provides insights into the different streamer models and their respective advantages. Brands should carefully consider which approach aligns best with their target audience, product characteristics, and brand values. The research suggests that different models may be more effective for different types of products and consumer segments.

For streamers and content creators, the study highlights the importance of building trust, demonstrating expertise, and cultivating authentic relationships with audiences. The success of KOLs in particular demonstrates the value of developing specialized knowledge and personal charisma to establish credibility and influence in specific domains.

For policymakers and regulators, the research provides evidence of the economic impact and employment opportunities created by e-commerce live streaming, particularly in markets like China and Southeast Asia. This information can inform policy decisions related to digital economy development, consumer protection, and industry regulation.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the research relies primarily on secondary data and existing literature, which may not capture the full complexity and nuance of e-commerce live streaming practices. Future research could employ qualitative methods, such as interviews with streamers, platform

operators, and consumers, to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences and decision-making processes within this ecosystem.

Second, the study focuses primarily on market-level analysis and typology development, without delving deeply into the psychological mechanisms that drive consumer behavior in e-commerce live streaming contexts. Future research could explore the cognitive and emotional factors that influence purchase decisions during live streaming sessions, including the role of social influence, urgency, and entertainment value.

Third, the research provides limited analysis of the challenges and risks associated with e-commerce live streaming, such as issues related to product quality, consumer protection, data privacy, and regulatory compliance. Future studies could examine these aspects more systematically to provide a more balanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges in this emerging field.

Finally, as e-commerce live streaming continues to evolve, future research should monitor emerging trends and innovations, such as the integration of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and other technologies that may further transform this space. Longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of media models, consumer behaviors, and market structures would provide valuable insights into the long-term trajectory of this phenomenon.

6. Conclusion

E-commerce live streaming represents a significant innovation at the intersection of media technology and retail commerce. By combining the immediacy and entertainment value of live streaming with the convenience and accessibility of e-commerce, this format has created new possibilities for how brands connect with consumers and how consumers discover and purchase products. The rapid growth of this phenomenon, particularly in Asian markets, demonstrates its potential to transform retail landscapes and create new economic opportunities.

This study has provided a comprehensive examination of the evolution, global development patterns, and operational models of e-commerce live streaming. The research has shown that this phenomenon is not merely a technological novelty but a complex ecosystem involving multiple stakeholders, diverse business models, and significant economic impact. As technology continues to advance and consumer preferences evolve, e-commerce live streaming is likely to remain a dynamic and influential force in the global retail landscape, warranting continued scholarly attention and practical innovation.

The journey from traditional mass media to interactive e-commerce live streaming illustrates the ongoing transformation of how we communicate, entertain, and transact in the digital age. This evolution reflects broader shifts in media consumption, technological capabilities, and commercial practices that are reshaping industries and creating new possibilities for human connection and economic exchange. As such, e-commerce live streaming serves as a compelling case study of innovation at the intersection of media, technology, and commerce, with implications that extend far beyond the specific context of online retail.

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