E-COMMERCE EVOLUTION: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CHINESE SMES

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Abstract

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) constitute the bedrock of China's robust economy, contributing significantly to its social and economic development. Accounting for over 90% of all enterprises, these entities play a pivotal role by contributing 60% to the GDP, generating more than 70% of patents, and employing around 90% of the workforce (Statista, 2021). Leveraging the expansive landscape of China's e-commerce sector, SMEs have strategically embraced and fortified their e-commerce systems, aiming to bolster their income-generating capacities (Statista, 2018).

Nevertheless, the unanticipated and unprecedented challenges posed by the double intertwined and once-in-a-century epidemic have compelled SMEs to confront a new paradigm. The market dynamics are shifting rapidly, marked by evolving and uncertain demands and an accelerated pace of globalization. Information and communication technology are recognized as pivotal factors influencing the sales revenue of SMEs (Bocconcelli et al., 2017). Amid this landscape, social media emerges as a powerful tool, enabling direct interaction between businesses and customers (Alansari et al., 2018). It functions as a dynamic virtual world, facilitating access to reliable and up-to-date information critical for business survival and growth (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021).

The Global Digital Survey (2022) underscores the pervasive influence of social media, with over 4.62 billion global users, constituting 58.4% of the world's population. Facebook, maintaining its dominance, boasts a staggering 2.912 billion monthly users (We Are Social and Hootsuite, 2022). Social media platforms have evolved beyond mere communication channels, transforming into hubs for news consumption. According to the Pew Research Center (2021), 69% of Twitter users in the U.S. rely on the platform as a source of news (Mitchell et al., 2021).

The platform's projected milestone of surpassing 1 billion monthly active users by the end of 2021 underscores its significance in the digital landscape (Iqbal, 2020). In the realm of international e-commerce and internet-based services, the United States and China stand at the forefront, driving innovation and wealth creation. Reports from The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (2021) indicate that China's online retail sales have surged, claiming more than half of the global online retail sales over the past three years and rapidly closing the gap with the United States (UNCTAD, 2021).

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1. Introduction

Statista (2021) reported that SMEs are the cornerstone of China's economy. SMEs are an important part of China's social and economic development, accounting for more than 90% of all enterprises, contributing 60% of GDP, more than 70% of patents and about 90% of employment. SMEs in China have utilized and strengthened their e-commerce development/system to take advantage of China's expanding e-commerce industry/economy to increase income capacity (Statista, 2018). However, under the influence of the unprecedented double intertwined and once-ina-century epidemic, SMEs are facing new challenges of changing and uncertain market demands and accelerating globalization. Sales revenue of SMEs influenced by the factors of information and communication technology (Bocconcelli et al., 2017). Social media can enable companies and customers to have direct interaction in the business environment (Alansari et al., 2018). Social media plays as an effective virtual world to access reliable and up-to-date information (Tajvidi & Karami, 2021). The Global Digital Survey (2022) report showed global social media users exceed 4.62 billion, equivalent to 58.4% of the global population and Facebook is still the most active social media platform with monthly 2.912 billion users (We Are Social and Hootsuite, 2022). According to the Pew Research Center report (2021), 69% of Twitter users in the U.S. get news from the platform itself (Mitchell et al., 2021). The TikTok becoming one of the fastest growing app in China and all over the world, which expected to surpass 1 billion active users monthly by the end of 2021 (Iqbal, 2020). According to The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (2021) reports, most of innovation and wealth about international e-commerce and other Internet based services are created by the United States and China, online retail sales of China is fast catching up and have taken a significant lead - accounting for more than half of the global online retail sales in the past three years (UNCTAD, 2021).

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The reason China's rapid progress in e-commerce and internet-based services originated from its widely available low-cost internet access services, of which it has been enabled by prompt expansion of world-class digital infrastructure, optical fiber networks are implemented and widely utilized in over 98% of Chinese villages in 2020 (H. Jiang & Murmann, 2022). It indicated that China's online shopping population rate has reached from 12.04% to 55.69% in the last decade (Rolfe, 2019), while still lower than the 75% of US (Statista, 2022).

Based on the previous study on social media strategies and some E-commerce live streaming strategies, this article concluded from selected articles that are highly related to appropriate criteria we mentioned in this article. Therefore, eight strategies of E-commerce live streaming have been found in this article, which are beneficial to SMEs owners who attempt to use live-streaming platforms as a marketing tool.

2. Methodology

It lasted more than three years since COVID-19 has spread across the globe from the end of 2020s, business sectors especially SMEs in China and all around the world suffered severe and huge crisis due to the urgent demand for the Virus prevention and protection. Owners of SMEs in China are seeking to maintain or improve their sales

performance by attempting to live streaming platforms including Diantao（APP）、TikTok(douyin APP)、Kuaishou(APP),etc. government officials in some small cities in China are leading to sell local products through live streaming platforms to solve sales problem of agricultural products, stimulate local economic development

and improve local products brand. CEOs of many popular enterprises or owners of SEMs stride into live streaming room or booth to explain and promote the features of various products (Y. Wang et al., 2020). Compare with the time before 2021, research on the strategies for live streaming is gradually becoming popular with scholars or researchers within these three years. Engagement between live streamers and viewers is rendered rather transparent through interactions including likes, shares on comments and retweets made by viewers (Kabadayi, S;Price, 2014).

As the research (Wardati & Er, 2019) method or principle referred to, this article highly focused on the characteristics of E-commerce live streaming, and found live streaming plays a role of relationship tool which offers opportunity for brand communication to enhance marketing campaigns between consumers and brands owners. Live streaming has been utilized as marketing tool typically because it is closely associated with brands elements including corporate brand activities, endorsement activities, latest products release activity, etc. viewers in live streaming room can be easily engaged in real-time interaction.

This article aimed at studying the E-commerce live streaming strategies around the SMEs in China. In conclusion, all articles selected are mainly between 2017 and 2022, while it referred to several articles published before 2017 due to theoretic conclusions mentioned are highly related to this research. The research method used in this study is mainly Systematic Literature Review (SLR). In order to find out the appropriate articles that are highly related to criteria this study set, SLR mainly focused on database Spis.hnlat.com including relative articles from emerald.com, Taylor & Francis, ieeexplore.ieee.org, Elsevier, Springer, books.google.com, etc. due to its powerful search ability widely used frequency among students and scholars in China.

This author of this article used keywords and title to search out the relevant results which accord with strategies studies for E-commerce live streaming platforms SMEs used in China. Major keywords adopted in this article are: **live-streaming marketing strategies in SMEs in China**, **live-streaming selling in SMEs in China**, **strategies for live-streaming as a marketing tool in SMEs in China**. Key title including **live-streaming as a marketing tool for increasing sales revenue in SMEs in China**, **live-streaming as a marketing tool to improve sales performance in SMEs in China**, **the strategies for live-streaming marketing in SMEs in China**.

The procedure of article selection in this study primarily as follows:

First, search out related articles from documents database based on keywords and titles in line with strategies for live-streaming as a marketing tool in SMEs. Second, exclude the articles that do not correspond to the inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria below. Third, note the selected article database based on the second step conditions followed up, and then exclude articles that are non-existent abstract relevance. Lastly, read each articles entirely and assess their quality and then select the literature that passed the final assessment.

The quantity results of journals generated in each retrieval stage and the results of articles selected are shown in Table 1.
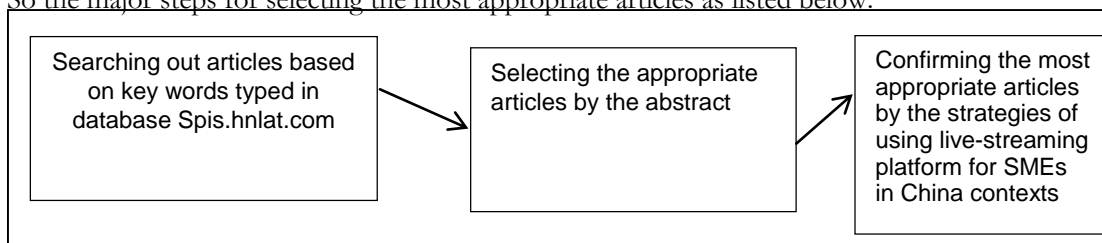
Table 1. Search results.

No.	Criteria	No. of Peer-Reviewed Articles from Spis.hnlat.com
1	Corresponding keywords entered	1150
2	Journal/article searched out	566
3	Published between 2017-2022	257
4	Appropriate abstract to conclude answers for this study	37

This research used inclusion and exclusion criteria to narrow the review to more related literature, inclusion criteria major for selected articles while exclusion criteria is for excluding articles of journals. The inclusion criteria noted in these articles are as follows:

☐   Mainly reviewed paper journal
☐   All literature should be English journal
☐   The search scope was articles published between 2017 until 2022
☐   The articles focused on live-streaming platforms available in SMEs in China The exclusion
     criteria noted in this study are as follows:
☐   The literature is irrelevant to the requirements of strategies for live-streaming platform for
     SMEs in China
☐   Not English language literature
☐   The articles were published before 2017

This study referred to selected articles from documents database according to on the inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria listed above, and assessed the quality and requirements of articles selected by reviewing abstracts and contexts. Most studies on E-commerce live streaming focused on the advantages of live streaming platforms that SMEs in China used, or emphasize its importance and merits with all respects, while some articles studied the strategies for using the live streaming platforms rather than merely stress the importance of it.
So the major steps for selecting the most appropriate articles as listed below:

Searching out articles based on key words typed in database Spis.hnlat.com	→	Selecting the appropriate articles by the abstract	→	Confirming the most appropriate articles by the strategies of using live-streaming platform for SMEs in China contexts

Considering the inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria listed above, the literature review of this study mainly carried out by three assessment stages above. Results showed that 1150 articles had been selected by searching on the No. of Peer-Reviewed Articles from Spis.hnlat.com through corresponding keywords entered, and 556 articles are closely related to abstracts criteria, while 257 of them were published between 2017-2022. The final stage of this Systematic Literature Review(SLR) was assessing and analyzing the contexts that referred to the strategies for utilizing live-streaming platforms for SMEs in China contexts, and 37 articles meet the relevant requirements and has been chosen for the research articles on final stage.

3. Results

Schiller (1999) found that China's digital economy is regarded as the global trailblazer (Schiller, 1999).

According to previous studies of online marketing trends and characteristics of E-commerce live streaming platforms, China is now becoming a leading trend of innovation in digital marketing development. Compared to traditional ecommerce platform, e-commerce live streaming platforms provide real-time video and communication (Yen, 2018), which can enhance trust and reduce perceived risk of consumers (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2018). It found that Social presence, communication quality, enjoyment and product related factors enhance the shopping experience, increase trust in the seller, and thus enhance the willingness to shop (Z. Wang

et al., 2022). The internet celebrities using live streaming platforms can better attract consumers and increase the possibility of purchase (Park & Lin, 2020). Taherdoost (2018) found that knowledge especially a high level of knowledge, is conducive to process of making an innovation decision (Taherdoost, 2018).

Deep penetration of E-commerce live streaming promotion needs support from government including influence of media, technical training, extension services and social influence, which referred to the policy support from government that individuals perceive society to offer (Zeweld et al., 2017). Customer responsiveness and attitude similarities with viewer in their live streaming room, realistic plots play as strongest predictor of streamer authenticity can enhance viewer online engagement (G. H. W. Liu et al., 2021). Random rewards strategy with support of online payment and smartphones can enhance consumer expected utility of live streaming sales (Peng et al., 2021). Customers' perceptions of the information quality, system quality, and service quality of online shopping malls' websites have a positive effect on the customers' perceptions of the quality of their relationship with this website provider (A. L. Y. Lee & Chan, 2015). User engagement strategies and social media strategies supported by reward systems and fan group-chat play with commenting, gifting and fan groups are available in live streaming strategies (Z. Lu et al., 2018). Immersion, immediacy, interactivity and sociality are important to watch live event engagement (Haimson & Tang, 2017). Some article argued that performance expectation from the platform and perceived website attractiveness could significantly promote streamers' willingness to continue streaming (Zhao et al., 2018). The audience rewards intention was influenced by the number of viewers and watching duration (Gros et al., 2017). It is found that the platform's website attraction, gaming mechanism, socialization, convenience, digitalization and other characteristics will attract users to participate in live streaming room (Li et al., 2020). Another highly related research article found that make the e-commerce live-streaming more interesting, develop user's interest, increase customer stickiness, and spontaneously spread, improve the fun of using the live broadcast platform and to affect users' reusing behavior (Su, 2019). Departments of government should work together with platforms to ensure the mobile network and create better environment for e-commerce live streaming (L. Liu et al., 2020). Interactive environment in Ecommerce live streaming room can improve sales performance (Min Zhang et al., 2020). Q&A service can dispel consumers' confusion and build consumers' loyalty (Hu & Chaudhry, 2020). It can promote brands in live streaming room through attracting viewers and establishing a positive brand attitude (Geng et al., 2020). The corresponding characteristics of E-commerce live streaming including expertise, attractiveness, credibility, interactivity, popularity, price support, affinity and responsiveness to create a role set to maintain the close relationship between the speaker and the salesperson (S. Zhang et al., 2022). Establishing relationship between customer and streamers can win trust and engagement (Wongkitrungrueng & Assarut, 2018). The authenticity and visualization of e-commerce live streaming help customers build trust (Hu & Chaudhry, 2020). Sellers need to create product page of chat interface for viewer who intend to consult products instead of browse other customers' comments merely (Sun et al., 2019). Slow reaction speed and low communication efficiency may affect customer trust (S. M. Lee & Lee, 2005) and the characteristics of real-time interaction in live streaming room can motivate customers to build trust (T. Lee, 2005). A good word-of-mouth effect of businesses and products can develop more potential consumers and promote reputation (Mingli Zhang et al., 2017a) (Mingli Zhang et al., 2017b). Increasing emotions such as smile in e-commerce live streaming room can get economic returns(Lin et al., 2021). Purchase intention of customers can be influenced through live streaming engagement including visibility affordance, metavoicing affordance and guidance shopping affordance (Sun et al., 2019). The social existence of e-commerce live streaming platform, audience, live streamers and telepresence can trigger consumers' impulse buying behavior (Ming et al., 2021).

Reducing product uncertainty and fostering trust between broadcasters and consumers can improve product recognition by consumers' perceived physical characteristic similarity (PPCS) and perceived value similarity (PVS) (B. Lu & Chen, 2021). Video content strategies including broadcasting live events, conducting an interview, crowdsourcing feedback, etc. gain the most value (Timoteo, 2017). The quality content is the motivator for successful live streaming video (Golum, 2016). Source credibility, hedonic attitudes, and self-product fit increase purchase intentions (Luo et al., 2021). High-quality products will enhance trust and subsequently form goodwill to retain old customers and attract new customers, and high-quality services will bring a pleasant shopping experience due to the service in the live streaming depends on the product introduction of online celebrities and their immediate feedback on audience comments (Park & Lin, 2020). Impulsive consumption can be promoted by rational pricing decision and ensuring high-value products (Y. Jiang & Cai, 2021). User participation mechanisms including product interaction, instant communication and peer cues positively affect viewers' attitudes and attract them to buy recommended products (X. Wang & Wu, 2019). Streamer attractiveness, para-social interaction and information quality factors can influence the viewer's cognitive and emotional states (Xu et al., 2020). Stimulating flow experience, real-time communication, the significant role of social orientation and harmony, synchronized communication whereby their quick-response messages can lead to driving the purchase of virtual gifts among live streamers (Guan et al., 2022).

From the results of literature review this study found above, the strategies of E-commerce live streaming for SMEs in China can be concluded below:

● Engagement strategy and social media strategy. Build interaction by reward system and fan group-chat play(e.g. immediacy, and peer cues) together with the commenting, gifting, fan group, immersion, immediacy, interaction and sociality to create an interactive environment with consumers. Reduce product uncertainty and create convenient atmosphere with social presence, enjoyment and internet celebrities to buy as well.

● Content strategy. Enhance broadcaster of live streaming to gain a high level of knowledge, social influence, livestreamers' authenticity by presenting realistic plots, customer response capability, response speed with questionand answer service and attitudinal similarity. Create a role set to maintain the close relationship between the speaker and the salesperson with the corresponding characteristics of E-commerce live streaming including expertise, attractiveness, credibility, interactivity, popularity, price support, affinity and responsiveness.

● Official policy strategy. It is necessary to vigorously strive for relevant government policy support, including media influence, technical training, and product promotion services; government departments and the platform itself must strengthen cooperation, build consensus, and jointly supervise the mobile network live streaming platform to establish a good live streaming environment for mobile terminals.

● Rewards strategy. Enhance customer engagement through random rewards strategy by the support of online payment and smartphones, promote reputation by word-of-mouth effect of business and products, both directly and indirectly by swift guanxi（关系）, coupons, virtual gifts and shopping experience.

● Quality strategy. Enhance customers' perception of high-quality products, the information quality, system quality, communication quality and service quality by platform and perceived website attractiveness, convenience, streamer's attractiveness, gamification mechanisms, para-social interaction, and participation in live streaming, set chat interface page of E-live streaming platform stores that customers and sellers can browse other customers' comments directly.

● Innovation strategy. Use innovative interaction forms and innovative communication methods to make fun of using live-streaming platform and affect user's reusing behavior to enhance user interest(e.g. real-time

communication), form customer stickiness, strengthen marketing stimulation, improve impulse purchase, improve the brand conversion rate by attracting audience and build positive brand attitudes. Innovation in content and form, make full use of AR, VR and other new technologies combined with mobile live streaming to make it more technological through further innovation in content and form; widely use electronic functional equipment, integrate multiple channels to create intelligent marketing, and further optimize the live streaming interface of mobile terminals to fully attract the viewers and intuitively let them understand the product.

● Pricing strategy. Use rational pricing decision and ensure high-value products to promote impulse consumption, use price discounts appropriately to promote sales revenue.

4. Conclusion

Due to the rise of Ecommerce live streaming trends among SMEs in China within last decade especially since the outbreak of the COVID-19, which has been adopted by many SMEs. While the research on E-commerce live streaming is still in the initial phase and the research on strategies for Ecommerce live streaming is also at start-up stage. Therefore, this article based on the previous research and use systematic literature review to conclude the specific strategies for e-live streaming above, which will offer some study enlightenment to researchers in this field, and operational guidance for E-commerce live streamers of SMEs in China.

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