

# *The Rise of Online Shopping after the Epidemic in the Perspective of Integrated Marketing Communication*

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**Abstract:** Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has been associated with improved sales. Marketers have long relied upon IMC strategies to boost brand awareness, product appeal, and brand discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic incited e-shopping behavior resulting from limited mobility. To arrest the spread, governments increased travel restrictions. Citizens also reduced movement to curb infections. Until then, shopping was a mobility-driven venture, and consumers readily took to online shopping, which hit \$5 trillion in global value. The upward trajectory was maintained even after the restrictions were lifted, raising the question of whether IMC programs influenced post-pandemic e-shopping. This research sought to test IMC stimulation of post-COVID e-shopping. Specifically, the researcher tested IMC's role in maintaining consumer interest and persuading impulse purchase -factors that eventually fostered post-pandemic online shopping. Using qualitative descriptive research, the researcher executed surveys and a case study that revealed IMC as a leading driver of post-pandemic online shopping. It is essential to research the importance of IMC as it is associated with the rise of internet shopping after the epidemic.

**Keywords:** Integrated marketing communication, epidemic COVID-19, internet shopping, social media

## 1. Introduction

In mid-2020, the world's retail industry was upended by the outbreak of COVID-19 that started in Wuhan, Hubei Province. The new form of pneumonia has spread to more than 180 countries and territories, causing innovative marketing and shopping solutions[1]. IMC has previously been linked to increased marketing efficiency, increased accessibility to larger audiences, cost and resource sensitivity, trustworthy marketing, and higher bottom lines [2] [3]. However, during the pandemic, marketers reduced their focus from out-of-home options (e.g. billboards) to internet-powered in-house strategies, including connected TV. Regarding shopping, consumers took to online shopping [4]. Records indicate a surge of about \$3 trillion in sales revenue to reach 5.2 trillion U.S. dollars worldwide [4]. Contrary to expectation, the recession of the pandemic did not affect the upward trajectory. As of 2022, the sales revenue for retail e-commerce stands at a little over \$8 trillion U.S. dollars.

IMC is a process of unifying market communications elements like social media, public relations, advertising, and business development principles to establish a solid and consistent brand identity across specific media channels [5]. IMC often encourages integrating many disciplines to develop a

more robust and concrete approach. IMC's effect can be seen throughout modern society, enterprise blogs, website display advertisements, outdoor billboards, search engine optimization, and magazine advertisements. Internet shopping rose after the epidemic [3]. In 2020, the World Health Organization imposed restrictions that impacted health, behavior, social, and economic situations [6]. The internet created a space that allowed people to connect well with friends, relatives, customers, and other people. Most importantly, the epidemic had a significant impact on consumer behavior. Research conducted by PwC survey reveals that "COVID-19 rapidly reshaped consumer behavior for consumers who are buying more essentials online and taking advantage of online shopping" [7]. In this connection, people opted to launch promotional activities through the internet and social media platforms to establish brands and increase sales by encouraging consumers to share information and invite other online friends [8]. The research paper will mainly use the descriptive research method under a qualitative design. The research will use surveys, observations, and case studies to collect relevant data regarding the topic under research.

## 2. Analysis

However, a shortage in IMC literature has meant that stakeholders cannot adequately link digital and online marketing efforts to the spike in online sales. This project attempts to fill this gap by exploring the post-COVID IMC versus e-shopping issue.

IMC had been linked to company success, including increased offline and online sales. However, a shortage of post-COVID IMC literature means marketers cannot link IMC to the specific online post-COVID growth. Furthermore, emerging data indicates that reduced mobility contributed to the preference for e-commerce. Research on this topic is much needed because researchers, lay people, marketers, and the C-suite ought to understand the connection between IMC and the rise in internet shopping. This study helps explain this phenomenon after the COVID-19 effect and assesses the future of IMC.

### 2.1. Internet Shopping, Mobility, and Integrated Marketing Communications

Discussions about mobility accompany conversations on internet shopping. Shopping is a critical purpose of making trips. Since virtual shopping removes mobility, discussions in the transport science domain must consider any reductions in transport activities. Researchers note a rapid emergence of e-shopping amidst the COVID-19 pandemic[9]. According to Nguyen et al. (2022), this uptick results from limited in-personal mobility. People, specifically those from high socioeconomic standing, had to reduce their daily trips due to restrictions, lockdowns, and the risk of infection [10]. Public transport experienced the steepest decrease in use, as consumers perceived higher risk of infection. Cycling increased in 2021, but its geographical limitations meant that users still relied on virtual shopping to access products and services found in different locations [10]. The rate of air travel was also reduced during the pandemic era, increasing the appeal of online shopping. Over time, shopping appeal was sustained even after mobility improved, lockdowns ceased, and transportation discounts reemerged [10]. This trend was surprising because researchers found in-store shopping enjoyment to negatively impact online shopping, especially for clothing. Marketers maintained e-shopping by creating long-lasting marketing and digital shopping strategies.

The decrease in shopping-related mobility also influenced internet-based marketing strategies such that companies prioritized in-house IMC strategies. Specifically, brands increased their social media footprint by offering empathy-driven ads. In 2021, about 84.2% of marketers reported using social media for brand building. About 54.3% said they leveraged it for customer retention during the pandemic [11]. At the time, marketers increased their social media spending by 74%. Research has shown that email engagement and spending increased during the pandemic as marketers and

consumers sought to complete transactions [7]. Finally, researchers observed an increase in connected TV (CTV) advertisements, with US marketers investing up to \$14.44 billion, a 59.9% increase over 2020. Advertisers also invested in radio ads despite these formats recording low returns on investment since the emergence of digital marketing. The mobility-limiting nature informed this trend of the pandemic. Some of the in-house investments focused on building advanced in-house data management techniques, including machine learning (ML), big data analytics, and general interactive marketing capabilities that ensured that marketing campaigns reached the right eyeballs and caused online purchases amid lockdown [12]. The in-house IMC was accompanied by the digitization of the supply-chain interactions that ultimately boosted e-shopping [11]. Digitally-portrayed corporate social responsibility messages were particularly popular during the pandemic. Marketers also invested in messages and reputations that increased consumer trust. These strategies were also depicted through digital platforms, including social media, email marketing, and connected TV[13]. According to Forbes and other sources, the pandemic caused a permanent shift in IMC and e-shopping from the pre-pandemic period [11]. CTV, social media, radio, and email marketing rates were maintained long after shelter-in-place orders were lifted. At the same time, online shopping rates remain higher than pre-COVID days leading to the following hypothesis.

## **2.2. Integrated Marketing Communications in Capturing Consumer's Attention**

IMC initiatives have been praised for capturing and holding customers' attention. Researchers agree that acquiring and maintaining consumer attention with marketing communication is critical for business success, especially in the present era where information overload is common [13]. Traditional marketing is characterized by message and consumer inconsistencies that affect product and brand appeal. IMC strategies ensure cohesion between all the paid, earned, and owned traditional and digital media [13]. Such consistency is associated with increased consumer attention, positively impacting brand awareness, perceived brand image, and word-of-mouth marketing [11]. These elements have been associated with increased online and in-store sales.

The discussion above leads to the following hypothesis.

## **2.3. The Effect of Integrated Marketing Communications on Online Impulse Purchase**

Efficient IMC marketing impacts impulse buying, which has increased over time following the pervasive nature of e-shopping. User Interface Engineering found that about 40% of all online shopping transactions are impulse purchases. This study performed in 2010-2011 found 10% more impulse transactions than Hausman's (2000) research[14]. As of 2016, the rate of impulse shopping had increased to about 70-90% of all online purchases. Wu and colleagues showed that 82% of respondents engaged in impulse transactions [11]. These studies have informed marketers' choices, leading to IMC strategies that boost impulse buying. Their efforts to integrate paid, earned, and owned traditional and digital media that sustains impulse buying include optimizing their website and offering online and in-store sales promotions. Impulse online purchases are triggered by easy product access, click ordering, fast delivery, and insignificant social pressures. Accordingly, optimization and sales promotion techniques, including ease of use, visual appeal, discounts, and product availability, positively affect consumers' impulsiveness[14]. Specifically, they influence the four kinds of impulse buying behavior: pure impulse buying (escape buying), reminder impulse buying (recall buying), suggestive impulse buying (need-envision buying), and planned impulse buying behavior (driven by discounted price and other sales promotion techniques). For instance, the number of homes that use websites and sales coupons for online shopping has abruptly increased [14]. Additionally, studies have recommended other sales promotion antecedents of consumers' online impulse purchases, such as clearance, cash rebates, buy-one-get-one-free, gift certificates, and bundling, which have greatly

influenced impulsive purchase decisions. The severe pandemic enabled companies to use sales promotions to their advantage. Since consumers were already worried about shortages and price increases, brands that offer sales promotions triggered large-scale impulse buying by accumulating food, cleaning, and sterilization products [11]. Regarding websites, researchers have advised companies to add informative content that drives impulse purchases. Therefore, the IMC has served as the stimulus of online impulse transactions in combination with website optimization and promotion.

Data collection was administered at the University of Illinois in Chicago. The university has more than 21,900 students (aged 18-39), making it the ideal tool for research involving online shopping. Notably, youths (millennials and generation-Zs have caused the most shift into virtual shopping. To prevent the transmission of coronavirus, the Commissioner of the Chicago Department of Health, issued safety protocols in March of 2022 [11]. The governor soon ordered a statewide lockdown, including the shutdown of universities. In the following months, companies noted an uptick in e-shopping that precipitated IMC and online supply chain management. To investigate the impact of IMC on millennial and generation Z's preference for e-shopping, they conducted a six-month survey between January 6th and June 6th, 2022 to collect information on the realities of post-COVID e-shopping. Correspondingly, they crafted an online questionnaire complete with inquiry objectives and participants' selection criteria. The characteristics needed for this sample included a self-professed reliance on online shopping. The students selected for the study indicated a growth in preference for e-shopping in 2022 as compared to pre-COVID days. Purposive sampling was utilized because researchers sought out participants who engaged in online shopping despite the ease in COVID-19 control measures. The researchers sent 1000 copies and only 300 students responded after the 10 days allocated to participant response and submission. Of the 300, 100 were excluded from analysis for failing to meet the eligibility criteria (a greater reliance on shopping long after safety guidelines were lifted).

The researcher also wanted to know the perceived impact off IMC on specific online companies. Amazon emerged as the ideal company seeing as it holds the record for highest monthly visits. Hence, for this part the researcher used qualitative case study method involving both online and offline observations and interviews. The interviews were conducted with two informants who possessed information on both sales and IMC programs. The researcher used structured questions to guide the case study. First, they tracked online sales growth, noting pre-and post-COVID outcomes. Second, the researcher analyzed the IMC program integrated during and after the pandemic. Finally, they inquired on the post-COVID 19 revenues to IMC programs.

The researcher noted a discrepancy between consumers' and informant's perception of IMC and its ability to cause an uptick in e-shopping. The consumer participants linked their post-COVID e-shopping trends to habits formed during the pandemic. More than 75% agreed that their post-pandemic behavior was caused by immobility during the pandemic – a finding that is consistent with existing data [10]. Majority of them (90%) also cited easy product access through click ordering, and fast delivery as leading causes for post-COVID virtual shopping. Essentially, they believed that companies improved their online supply and distribution channels during the pandemic leading to more appeal. This result is consistent with existing literature indicating that companies improve their online distribution systems [14]. On the other hand, informants felt that IMC contributed to improved post-COVID virtual shopping. This group noted that they included influencer marketing, CTV, and other strategies that offered consumers a nudge to purchase. Influencer marketing remains an effective strategy for attracting online shoppers so their assertions were consistent with existing literature.

Another discrepancy was noted in the perceived value of IMC in stimulating impulse transactions. Most responders felt that they performed rational purchases, with only 20 linking IMC to impulse

buying. Informants, on the other hand, linked IMC to an uptick in impulse e-shopping. The two informants noted that impulse purchase was not limited to inexpensive daily-use products only but also expensive items. The researcher also inquired whether IMC tactics have created a cohesive marketing strategy that has improved post-COVID virtual shopping rates. Both informants agreed that IMC tactics had increased the appeal of online shopping.

### 3. Conclusion

The present research was designed to analyze the effect of integrated marketing communications on e-shopping. Studies involving Amazon informants and consumers at the University of Illinois in Chicago revealed a discrepancy between the perceived value of IMC in the upward online shopping trend. Regardless, IMC has greatly influenced consumers' decisions to shop virtually. Apart from stimulating impulse purchases, IMC is associated with better consumer attention, leading to post-COVID online shopping. Marketers must improve online supply systems to maximize IMC-online shopping returns. IMC had been linked to company success, including increased offline and online sales. However, a shortage of post-COVID IMC literature means marketers cannot link IMC to the specific online post-COVID growth. Furthermore, emerging data indicates that reduced mobility contributed to the preference for e-commerce. Research on this topic is much needed because researchers, lay people, marketers, and the C-suite ought to understand the connection between IMC and the rise in internet shopping. This study helps explain this phenomenon after the COVID-19 effect and assesses the future of IMC. However, although this essay demonstrates the relationship between IMC and online shopping after the epidemic, it does not specifically demonstrate what method can help business owners better combine IMC and online shopping.

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