WHAT'S NEW IN PUBLISHING

INSIGHT REPORT



ECOMMERCE IN PUBLISHING

TRENDS AND STRATEGIES

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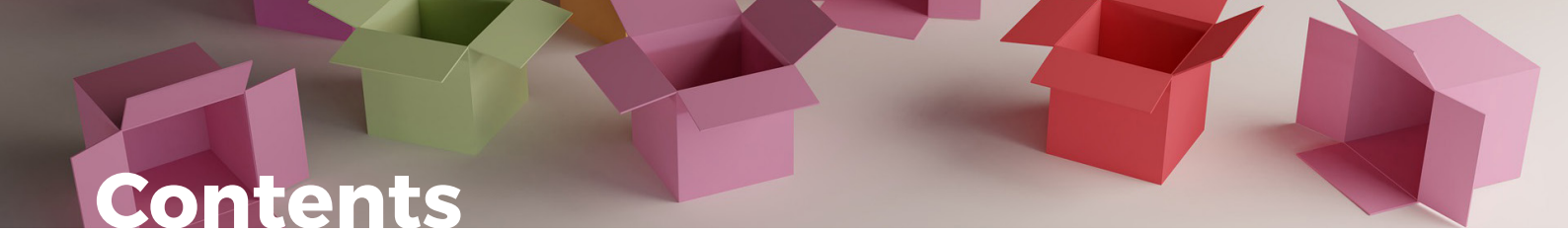
School of Journalism and Communication

Written by:
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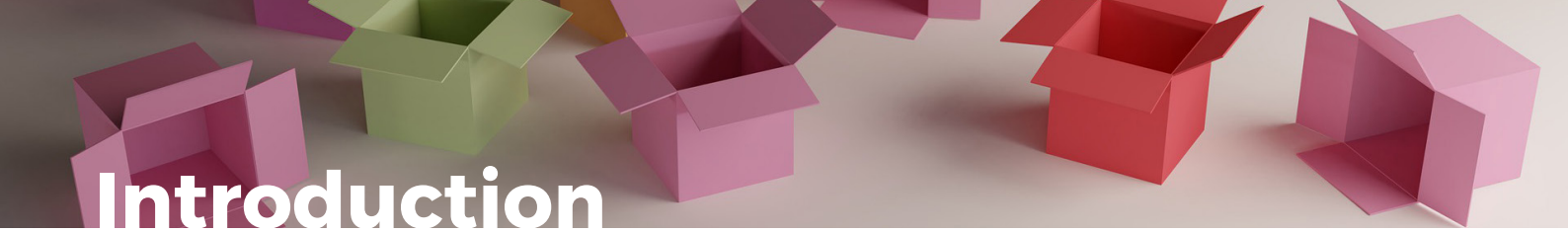
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Introduction

Back in late 2019 and early 2020, I authored two reports[1] for *What's New In Publishing* looking at the impact - and potential - for eCommerce as a revenue stream for publishers.

With the exception of outlets[2] such as Marie Claire UK[3], Dennis Publishing, BuzzFeed[4], Future and POPSUGAR[5] many of those efforts still felt quite embryonic. I felt that the potential for media players to more effectively harness the relationship between their content and commerce was often going unrealised.

Because of this, a key goal of those initial reports was to highlight these possibilities and to provide inspiration and insight that might, in turn, help more publishers to see how eCommerce could feasibly work for them.

My sense was that eCommerce would only become more important to publishers, as they sought to diversify their revenue streams and look for new sources of income.

Two and a half years later, catalyzed by COVID (and not my reports!) the situation could not be more different. Initial scepticism, wariness and uncertainty about the potential for eCommerce has gradually begun to wane, as publishers become increasingly interested in the potential for content-led commerce and other eCommerce possibilities.

New research from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism finds[6] that the COVID crisis has "accelerated" efforts to generate money through subscriptions and eCommerce, with 30% of commercial publishers surveyed indicating that this would be an "important" or "very important" revenue stream for them in 2022. More widely, the only revenue areas deemed more important were - no surprises here - subscriptions, advertising and events.

eCommerce's moment has come. A combination of shifting consumer behaviours, coupled with the urgency to diversify revenue streams, means that growing numbers of publishers are ready to cross the online shopping Rubicon.

We hope that this report can help more publishers to see the potential for eCommerce as part of their revenue mix, how it can complement their content and provide a logical next step in their relationship with the media they are already accessing (and often acting upon).

That's a story that we have seen unfolding over time, and one that we will continue to watch - and share - with interest.

Damian Radcliffe
February 2022

> *"eCommerce, also known as electronic commerce or internet commerce, refers to the buying and selling of goods or services using the internet, and the transfer of money and data to execute these transactions.*
>
> *eCommerce is often used to refer to the sale of physical products online, but it can also describe any kind of commercial transaction that is facilitated through the internet."*
>
> *Definition via Shopify*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Damian Radcliffe is the Carolyn S. Chambers Professor in Journalism, and a Professor of Practice, at the University of Oregon.

Alongside holding the Chambers Chair, he is also a Fellow of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, an Honorary Research Fellow at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture Studies, and a fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA).

An experienced digital analyst, consultant, journalist, and researcher, Damian has worked in editorial, research, policy, and teaching positions for the past two decades in the UK, Middle East, and USA.

This includes roles in all media sectors (commercial, public, government, regulatory, academic, and nonprofit/civil society) and all platforms (print, digital, TV and radio).

Damian continues to be an active journalist, and frequently appears in other publications such as journalism.co.uk, ZDNet, *What's New in Publishing* and IJNET.

He writes about digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media, and the evolution of journalism. Damian is the author of *50 Ways to Make Media Pay*, *The Publisher's Guide to eCommerce*, *The Publisher's Guide to eCommerce: Case Studies*, and *The Publisher's Guide to Navigating Covid-19*, special insight reports sponsored by Sovrn and published by *What's New In Publishing* between 2019-21.



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ABOUT US

Founded in 2008, *What's New In Publishing* provides a single destination for independent publishing businesses looking for news, advice and education across a wide range of publishing subjects.

We cover developments in digital publishing, magazines, and newspapers, focusing on the issues and technological advances confronting the industry at a time of profound disruption, offering practical and useful advice from "What's New?" to "What Next?".

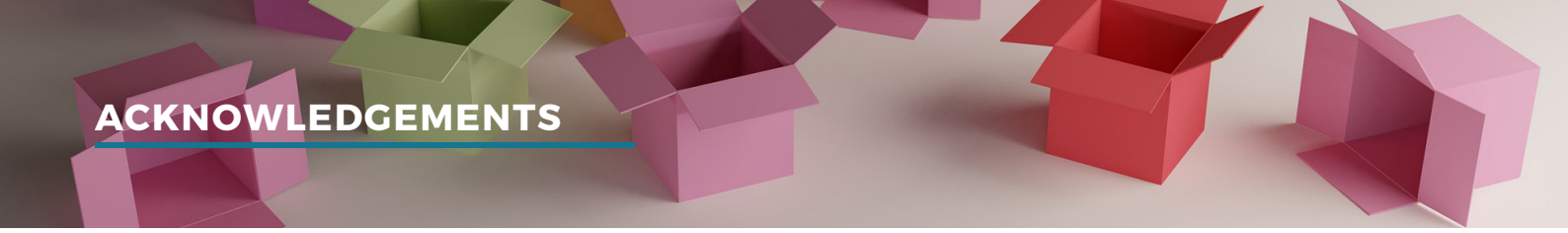
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School of Journalism and Communication

About the University of Oregon

Nestled in the lush Willamette Valley, with an easy drive to both the Pacific Ocean and the Cascade Mountains, the University of Oregon is renowned for its research prowess and commitment to teaching. The UO is one of just two Pacific Northwest members of the prestigious Association of American Universities, a consortium of 62 leading public and private research institutions in the United States and Canada. It is also a Tier 1 national public research university.

Find out more: **www.uoregon.edu**

About the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication

With a century-long history, the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC) is one of the first professional journalism schools in the country, the only accredited comprehensive journalism program to include advertising and public relations in the Pacific Northwest, and one of only 112 accredited programs worldwide.

The SOJC is a community of media scholars and professionals dedicated to teaching, research, and creative projects that champion freedom of expression, dialogue, and democracy in service to future generations.

Our home in the Pacific Northwest and the opportunities of our location are reflected in our explorations of media, technology, and the human condition.

Through our undergraduate and graduate programs in media studies, journalism, public relations, and advertising, we conduct research and craft nonfiction stories on such critical and global subjects as the environment, diverse cultures, and international issues. We facilitate relationship building that entails respect for consumer advocacy, transparency, and civic engagement.

By integrating theory and practice, we advance media scholarship and prepare students to become professional communicators, critical thinkers, and responsible citizens in a global society.

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Overview: Why eCommerce? Why now?

In this first chapter, we explore the growing prominence of eCommerce in publishers' revenue strategies and the role that Covid-19 has played in accelerating this trend.

An increasingly important revenue stream

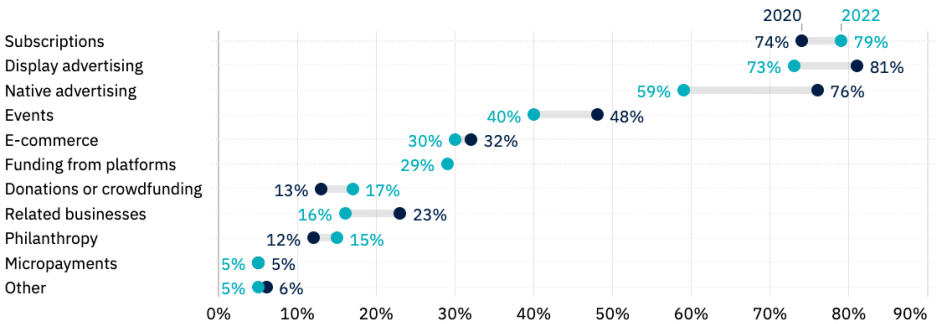
"Publishers say that, on average, four different revenue streams will be important or very important this year," Nic Newman wrote in his annual "Journalism, Media and Technology Trends Predictions" report for 2021[7].

Little has changed since, Newman's newly released study for the year ahead[8] suggests that publishers are looking to stay the course and maintain this type of revenue mix, focused on "three or four different revenues."

Although media leaders surveyed by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), who published the study, ranked eCommerce fifth - in terms of their most important revenue stream for the year ahead - Newman also noted that 2021 promised "to be a year of economic reshaping, with publishers leaning into subscription and eCommerce – two future-facing business models that have been supercharged by the pandemic."

Subscriptions are now considered the most important revenue stream, ahead of ads

Data from a survey of 246 media leaders in 52 countries for 'Journalism, media and technology trends and predictions 2022'.



Q7. Which of the following digital revenue streams are likely to be important or very important for your company in 2022? Choose all that apply. Base: Commercial publishers only. N=216. **Note:** Respondents were not asked about platform funding in 2020.

Via RISJ' s Annual Trends and Predictions Report 2022

eCommerce, the 2021 and 2022 reports suggest, is a revenue trend that is in the ascendancy, and an area that is only going to grow in importance for publishers.

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Other studies have drawn similar conclusions.

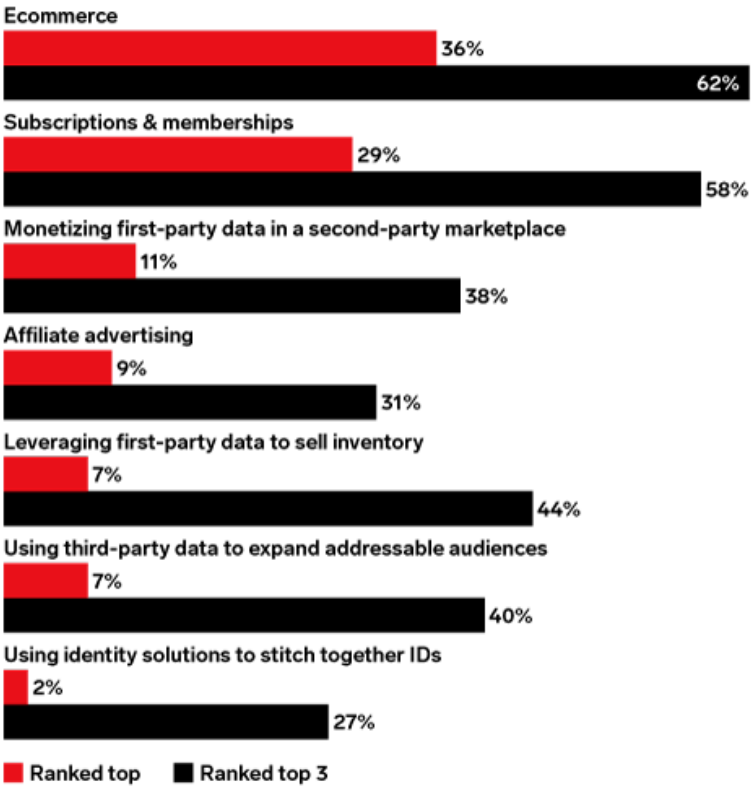
In the U.S., data published by eMarketer[9] - based on a survey by the data management platform Lotame - found that more than a third of the publishers they surveyed said that eCommerce would be their biggest source of revenue in Q1 2021, with nearly two-thirds (62%) indicating that it would be in their top three revenues sources for the quarter.

The reason for this optimism, they observed[10], was due to the fact that "as consumers increasingly use media content to discover and research products and brands online, publishers are forging an increasingly meaningful place in the customer journey."

"Publishers are instituting eCommerce strategies that now position them as retailer and brand partners capable of driving conversions," they added. "And marketers are recognizing publisher partnerships as valuable ways to shorten the funnel."

Largest expected sources of revenues in Q1 2021 according to US publishers

% of respondents, Dec 2020



Note: n=45
Source: Lotame, "Beyond the Cookie: The Future of Advertising for Marketers & Publishers," Feb 17, 2021
Via eMarketer

The impact of the Covid crisis

One key rationale for these developments has been the accelerated adoption of eCommerce as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

With lockdowns and quarantine forcing many consumers to buy - or buy more - online, one early report stated[11] that adoption of eCommerce had suddenly spiked to reach a level not anticipated in the U.S. for another five years.

Globally, data from the United Nations trade and development experts UNCTAD, reported[12] that B2C eCommerce had grown from 16% of all retail sales in 2019 to 19% in 2020.

Within this, "the digital retail economy [that] experienced [the] most growth is the Republic of Korea, where internet sales increased from around one in five transactions in 2019, to more than one in four last year," they commented.

Looking ahead, "the shift to eCommerce will slow down as coronavirus restrictions lift and economies open up again, but won't go into reverse," Zenith predicted[13] in summer 2021.

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Their Advertising Expenditure Forecasts report noted not only "the structural shift in the economy from bricks-and-mortar sales to eCommerce, driving more consumers than ever to research and complete purchases online," but also its impact on advertising budgets.

"Zenith expects eCommerce to continue to pull in incremental revenues to the ad market," they said, "driving 13% growth in social media and 12% growth in search in 2022."

Online retail sales, selected economies, 2018-2020

Economy	Online retail sales ($ billions)			Retail sales ($ billions)			Online share (% of retail sales)		
	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020
Australia	13.5	14.4	22.9	239	229	242	5.6	6.3	9.4
Canada	13.9	16.5	28.1	467	462	452	3.0	3.6	6.2
China	1,060.4	1,233.6	1,414.3	5,755	5,957	5,681	18.4	20.7	24.9
Korea (Rep.)	76.8	84.3	104.4	423	406	403	18.2	20.8	25.9
Singapore	1.6	1.9	3.2	34	32	27	4.7	5.9	11.7
United Kingdom	84.0	89.0	130.6	565	564	560	14.9	15.8	23.3
United States	519.6	598.0	791.7	5,269	5,452	5,638	9.9	11.0	14.0
Economies above	**1,770**	**2,038**	**2,495**	**12,752**	**13,102**	**13,003**	**14**	**16**	**19**

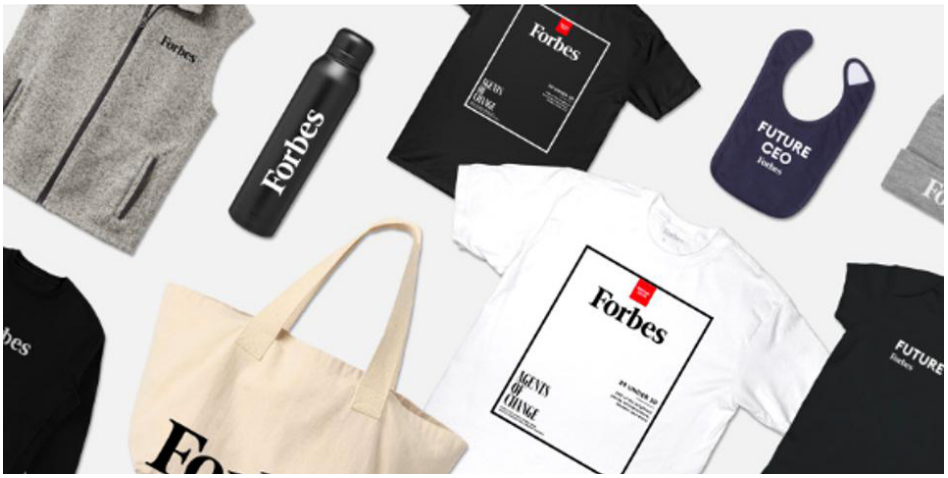
Via the United Nations

The impact of the Covid crisis

Although no one can predict[14] what will happen as Covid-19 evolves[15] to become endemic, the eCommerce bump that we have witnessed over the last 18 months looks set to continue.

"Connected tech" has become an increasingly essential ingredient of many people's lives[16], and as Simon Kemp, CEO of Kepios and chief analyst at DataReportal, hypothesised[17] during the early stages of the crisis, "with many people now using these platforms multiple times each day, it's likely that significant numbers of people have already overcome key barriers to trial and adoption."

Subsequently, given the prospects for eCommerce's continued growth, this has become a potential revenue stream that is too big for many publishers to ignore.



Promotional image for the Forbes Store, via Forbes

As a result, we have seen traditional publishers like Forbes move into online shopping - offering branded products and apparel - following the launch[18] of its Forbes Store; Future Publishing - which drove[19] nearly $1 billion in eCommerce sales in 2020 - expanding its business by adding price comparison tech[20] via the acquisitions of the GoCo Group and Marie Claire US to its portfolio[21]; and the New York Times deciding[22] to put its product review website Wirecutter behind the paywall, and accessible to NYT subscribers or to those willing to take out a dedicated subscription.

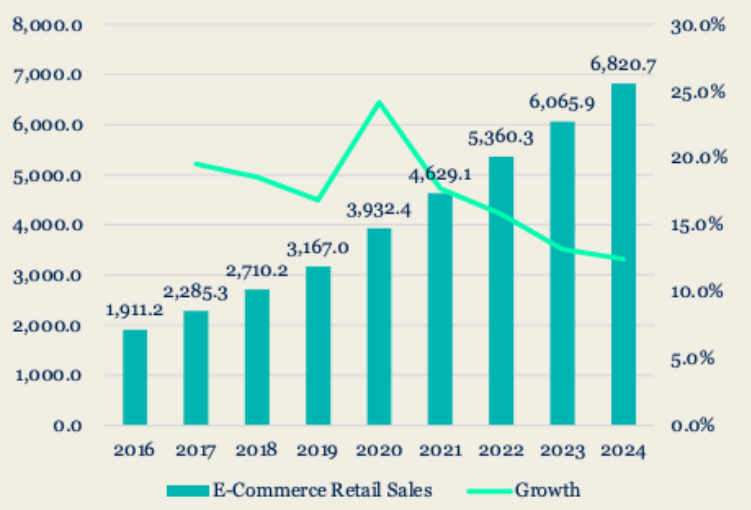
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These moves have been accompanied by bullish pronouncements from a number of agencies about the prospects for long-term prospects for eCommerce.

WPP-owned Group M, in their first-ever eCommerce forecast[23], anticipated that global retail eCommerce was worth $3.9 trillion in 2020, akin to 17% of equivalent global retail sales (a figure that excludes online food and delivery services).

"By 2024 retail-focused eCommerce will amount to $7 trillion in annual sales activity or 25% of retail sales at that time," they predicted, and "if growth continues at a low double-digit pace in subsequent years, then, by 2027, eCommerce sales would amount to $10 trillion globally."

Group M's eCommerce predictions ($ in Billions)



December 2020

Meanwhile, alongside consumer spending, Zenith's data suggested that not only would eCommerce help to drive increases in advertising spending, it would also bring "new money to the ad market."

As they explained in a press release[24], these revenues would be "coming from small businesses that have had to pivot rapidly to eCommerce to survive lockdowns, and from budgets that brands would previously have allocated to retailers to secure physical shelf-space, which they are now spending on display and search ads on retailer websites."

Collectively, these shifts in purchasing behaviours and advertising spending are combining to create new eCommerce opportunities for publishers. We will explore these possibilities - and examples of them in action - in the next couple of chapters.

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Affiliate revenue: still a publisher's best eCommerce bet?

In this second chapter, we examine the growing prominence of eCommerce in publishers' revenue strategies and the role that COVID-19 has played in accelerating this trend.

An established revenue formula

For many publishers, affiliate relationships will be their first - and often primary - foray into eCommerce.

As eMarketer has explained[25], these revenues come from "commissions earned on conversions or clicks they drive to a brand or retailer through affiliate links placed in content on their sites or other channels, like their social media accounts and email newsletters."

"It is a monetization model," Shopify observes[26], "where an affiliate partner... is rewarded a payout for providing a specific result to the retailer or advertiser." "Typically, the result is a sale. But some programs can reward you for leads, free-trial users, clicks to a website, or getting downloads for an app."

Globally, the affiliate market - which encompasses cashback and reward sites, as well as publishers and other content creators, social networks and other delivery mechanisms - is worth over $12 billion a year[27]. In the U.S. alone, affiliate marketing spend is projected[28] to reach $8.2 billion in 2022, up from $5.4 billion in 2017.



Via Shopify

Put simply, with values like these, this is too big a market for publishers to ignore.

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Affiliate revenue's Covid bump

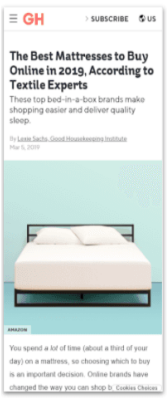
Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of publishers - such as BuzzFeed, Condé Nast, Meredith, Hearst, and Vox Media were already tapping into the potential for eCommerce[29], and in particular the opportunities for generating affiliate revenue.

However, with the Covid crisis acting as a catalyst for increased online shopping, more publishers - and marketers - have embraced this space. The move appeared to pay dividends for some of these companies.

By August 2020, according to[30] Dunia Silan, VP Revenue for Europe, the Middle East and Africa at Skimlinks - an affiliate marketing platform - the top 50 U.K. publishers generated £86 ($113.42) in average revenue per article, up by more than 100% in the past five months.

Examples of content types that can generate affiliate revenue

Comparison



Deals



Reviews



Guides



Via Skimlinks

They were not alone in this success. On the other side of the pond, New York Magazine's shopping site, The Strategist, saw an 85% year-over-year increase in revenue during the second quarter in 2020[31]. Hearst UK saw even bigger numbers[32], witnessing 322% growth in eCommerce revenue for the same quarter compared to the same period a year previously. Former Shopify CTO Jean-Michel Lemieux tweeted[33] in April 2020 that "our platform is now handling Black Friday level traffic every day!"

Although these record-breaking numbers were a by-product of a very specific time period, the eCommerce momentum enjoyed by many publishers has continued (albeit at a slower rate). Future plc's interim results for the six months up to the end of March 2021[34], for example, noted that their eCommerce affiliate revenues were up 116% (worth £85.2 million) compared to 2020.

As a result of longitudinal shifts in consumer habits and the continued growth of spending in this space by marketers and brands, fresh forays into eCommerce, and affiliate revenue strategies, continue to be seen from a wide variety of different publishers.

Affiliate approaches in action

Perhaps the most obvious example of ways in which publishers are making money through affiliate revenues can be seen in the rise of recommendation sites[35] and verticals.

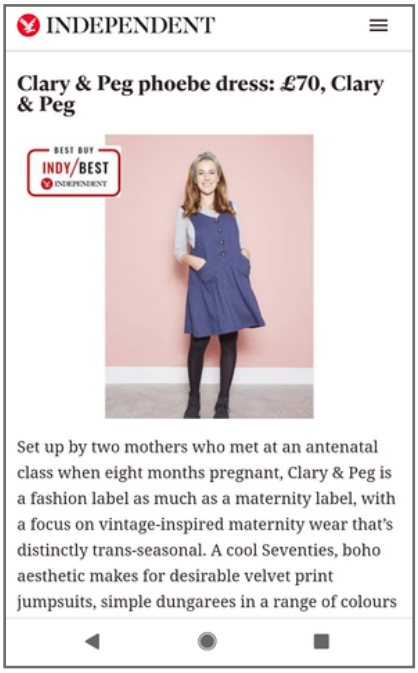
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In the U.K, The Sun, a British tabloid, now employs five people dedicated to producing Sun Selects, a collection of buying guides and product recommendations, as well as 10-15 freelancers.

At another British outlet, The Independent, their Indy Best section has continued to expand, in part due to COVID-era shopping habits. The site, which offers product reviews and buying guides, "doubled the size of the team... to 16 people, including ten full-time editorial roles, during the pandemic," Press Gazette has reported[36].

"This [affiliate marketing] is a long-term commitment, and was before the pandemic," said the Independent's managing director Christian Broughton. "We are accelerating as fast as we can to grow this and I don't anticipate it's going away."

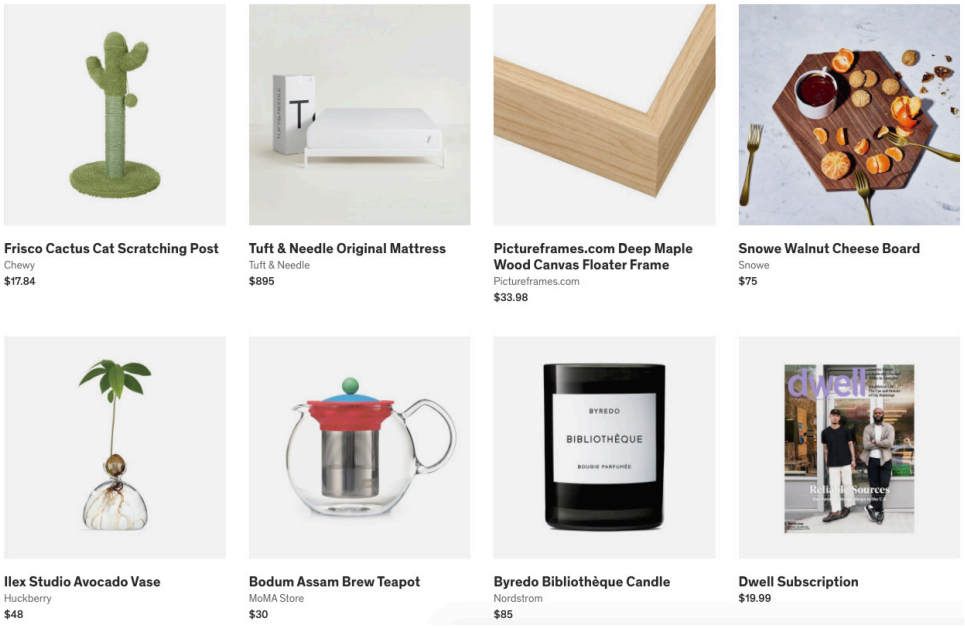
Alongside traditional affiliate approaches - such as dedicated review sections and embedding shopping links in specific articles (see, for example, articles on BuzzFeed highlighting the best women's white t-shirts, toilet paper and shower curtains) - multiple publishers are also setting up online shops. These digital stores can take a number of different forms, including those focused on generating affiliate sales.



Indy Best: 9 Best Maternity Dresses

The home design magazine Dwell, is just one publication that has adopted this approach. Aside from offering articles, guides to various home projects and links to contractors, their website also features an online shop that offers "expertly curated selection of finely crafted home, office, travel, and lifestyle products."

Clicking on an item in Dwell's store takes you through to the third-party vendor where you can complete your sale.



Dwell's online store, November 2021

What's next? How affiliate relationships are changing

The future for affiliate revenues offers something of a mixed bag for publishers.

On the one hand, you have an increasing number of players - like Vice[37] - moving into this space[38]. Others like Gannett, have expanded their operations[39], while the New York Times' decision[40]

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to put their review website, Wirecutter, behind a paywall (and to offer a standalone subscription for it) reflects the confidence they have in this product.

Meanwhile, the emergence of affiliate technology and networks like those offered by companies such as Tipser, Skimlinks, Sovrn and Rakuten, can do much of the hard technical work for publishers - offering CMS and other digital solutions to support eCommerce activity - as well as acting as the conduit between publishers and merchants.

At the same time, publishers also need to be wary of putting all of their eggs in one (online shopping) basket. The decision by major retail partners like Amazon and Walmart to cut the commission[41] they pay their affiliate partners, may impact[42] a publisher's bottom line and the effectiveness of their affiliate strategy.

Publishers also need to be cognizant of the fact that online habits are changing, and there are multiple ways that they can generate eCommerce revenue. As we shall see, affiliate revenues are not the only game in town.

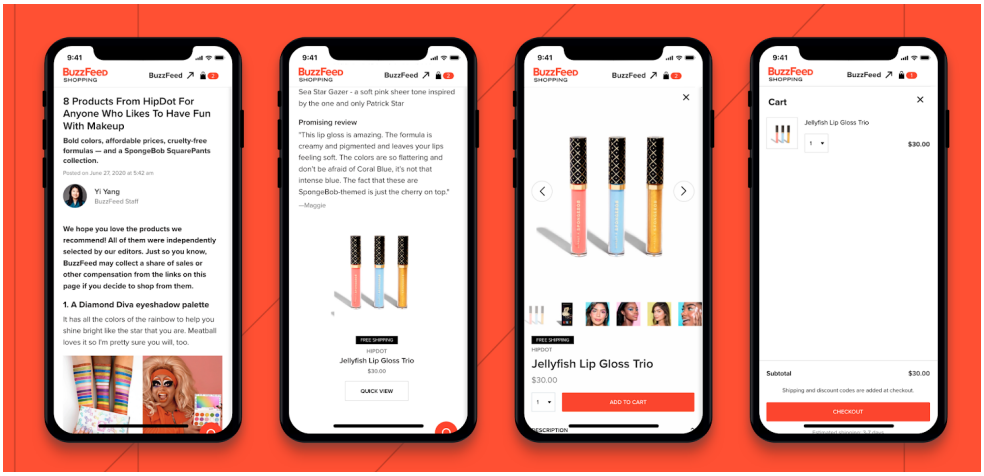


Outlets like BuzzFeed, for example, are experimenting with direct-to-consumer options[43], enabling audiences to purchase directly from their site - or social feeds - without having to click away to a third party.

Moreover, as online shopping on social networks becomes more commonplace (these platforms are already influential in shaping many purchasing decisions)[44], so publishers will need to refine their affiliate strategies by factoring in affiliate and eCommerce opportunities across *their* social channels too[45].

All of this is to say, as Web Publisher PRO put it[46], "although affiliate marketing is not a silver bullet, it can be an important part of a publisher's larger approach to website monetization."

In particular, they note, "digital publishers are seeing the greatest gains when they combine real world events (like the



Promotional illustration of the BuzzFeed Shopping website

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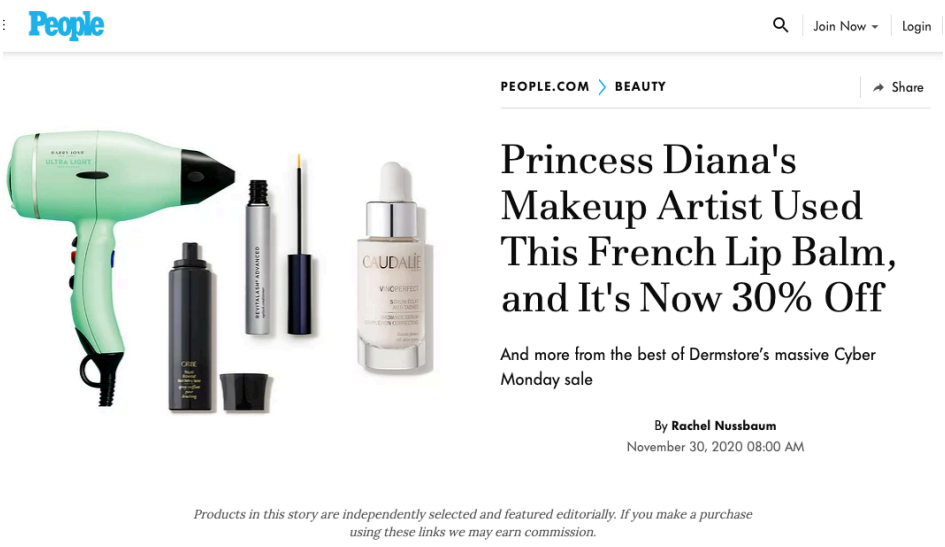
pandemic or upcoming seasonal weather events) with online retail."

This is particularly true around major shopping periods, such as Black Friday, Cyber Monday and Singles Day, foci that are already important revenue peaks for a number of publishers.

"Over the past three years, Meredith has seen more than 100% year-over-year growth in affiliate revenue [thanks to commerce content]," disclosed[47] Chloe Reznikov, General Manager of Commerce Content and Strategy at Meredith Corporation, recently. "During the 2020 holiday season, Meredith drove $35 million in Prime Day sales and $36 million in Black Friday/Cyber Monday sales via our commerce content program."

What we are seeing, therefore, is an increasingly busy affiliate space, as an ever-growing number of publishers muscling into this space.

Increased competition from other media companies, the emergence of social commerce and the ability to shop on social networks, coupled with a need to avoid overreliance on a single partner or platform, are all strategic considerations that publishers need to be cognizant of.


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Nevertheless, this is a growing consumer market too. And audiences are becoming increasingly used to seeing affiliate links alongside the content they are consuming. As a result, because of the commercial and content opportunities affiliate revenue can generate, it's clear that affiliate revenue will continue to be part of publishers' eCommerce strategies for some time to come.

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Beyond affiliate: stores, subscription boxes, and more

In this third chapter, we share five different mechanisms being deployed by publishers to tap into the growing potential for eCommerce.

Although affiliate revenues remain an important plank in publisher's eCommerce strategies, they are far from the only method being used.

Increasingly, publishers are looking to diversify their eCommerce activity, developing their own online stores, as well as exploring shoppable content on social media and opportunities to tap into the wider subscription economy.

Here are five of the most promising ways publishers are going beyond affiliate relationships to develop their eCommerce revenues.

Online stores

Having a shop on your website is not necessarily a new idea for many publishers, but we are seeing two discernible trends in this space.

The first is the growth in publishers offering merchandise related to their brand. GQ U.S., for example, launched its first-ever eCommerce shop in August 2020. Selling products costing between $40 and $100, its owners, Condé Nast, described the initiative[48] as "the next logical step in the brand's eCommerce ecosystem."

"The GQ logo is a global icon—synonymous with great personal style, of course, as well as with a forward-pushing, progressive idealism," said editor-in-chief Will Welch, in a press release.

"Our audience has made it clear that while it's great to look or feel or even be GQ, they also want to wear our logo. So today, we're answering the call with the launch of The GQ Shop. We



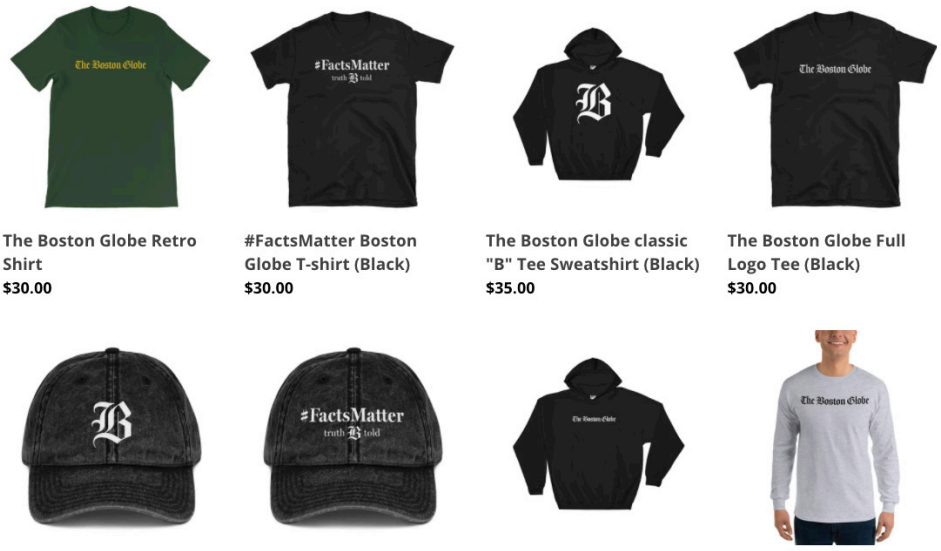
Classic GQ logo tee in washed-out green, via the GQ Shop, November 2021

Electronic copy available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4075431

started by making a handful of cool T-shirts that myself and the team could see ourselves wearing everyday."

The opening of the GQ Shop was built on the success of GQ Recommends, which launched in January 2018. By summer 2020, these editor-picked selections generate affiliate sales, and revenues from this are up over 100% YTD compared to 2019, the company reported[49].

Other publishers selling branded apparel include the LA Times, The Economist and The Boston Globe.



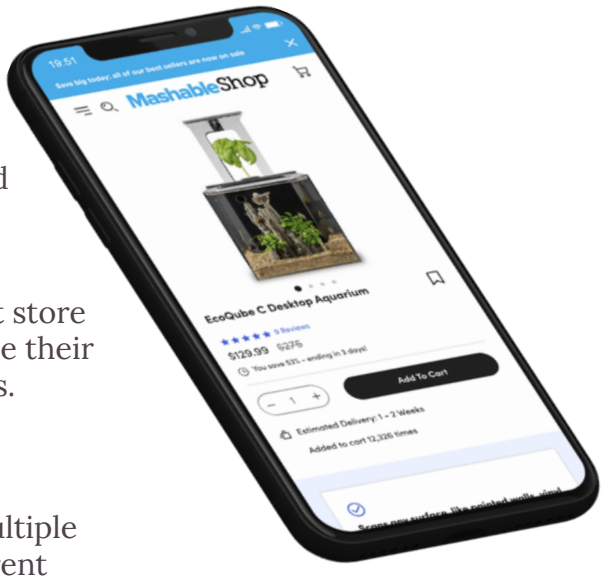
Selected products sold via the Boston Globe online store

Beyond selling branded merch - in the form of mugs, t-shirts and other apparel - the second discernible trend is that purchases are completed on a publisher's own site, rather than users clicking away for an order to be fulfilled on another site, like Amazon.

Such moves enable publishers to keep readers on-site and this type of native commerce is increasingly being deployed by a wide range of publishers.

One solutions provider, StackCommerce, works with more than 1,000 publishers and over 5,000 brands, offering everything from the building of white label stores through[50] to "shop UI, product sourcing, merchandising, logistics, creative, customer service, and more." Their clients include Mashable, CNN, New York Post, Entrepreneur, TMZ and Yahoo!.[51]

Stack's Content Studio can also write articles to support store products, so that publishers don't necessarily have to use their own internal editorial resources to support these efforts.



Mock-up of how a product might look on the Mashable Shop, via StackCommerce

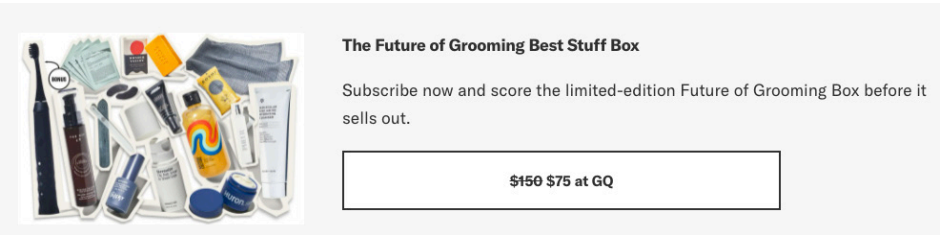
Subscription boxes

Subscription eCommerce is a growing trend[52] across multiple industries and one being used by a wide variety of different businesses. Publishers are also tapping into this space in a number of different ways.

Alongside launching an online store, in January 2018, GQ launched[53] their Best Stuff Box, a quarterly package containing apparel, grooming products and style accessories. Revenues from

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the subscription-based GQ Best Stuff Box were also up over 150% by August 2020.



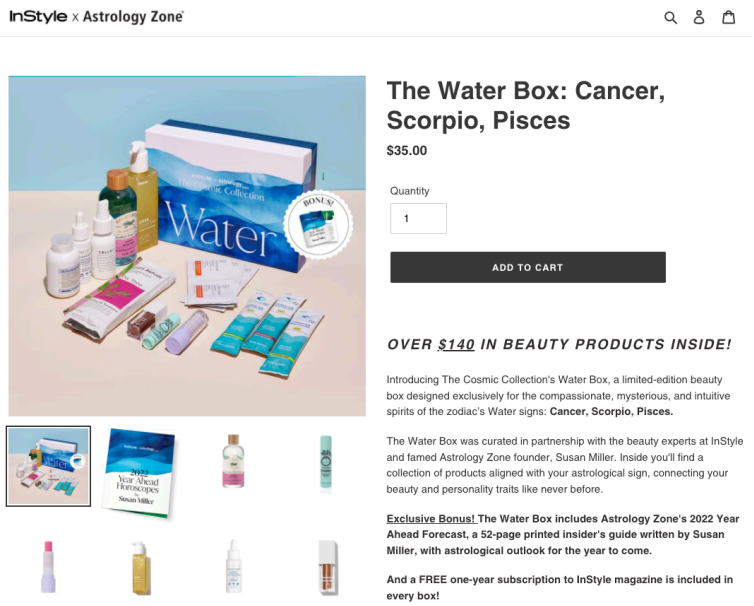
An offer (November 2021) for a reduced price Future of Grooming Box, if you took out - or have - a subscription to GQ.

At the end of 2021, GQ subscribers could get the four boxes for $190 (a $10 discount on the $50 box price, as well as a free subscription thrown in for good measure) with an even steeper discount - 50% - offered[54] on their limited-edition Future of Grooming Box.

Other outlets have followed suit, with InStyle and The Cut launching[55] their first product boxes in November 2021. Meredith's InStyle magazine offered a limited-edition beauty box, with the contents "tailored to your astrological sign."[56, 57]

Products like this can be very appealing for companies due to their potential to provide predicted revenue streams[58], as well as their ability to yield valuable consumer data.

Digiday also explains how product boxes "can be a tactile way for a media company to engage with people, show off its editorial curation abilities with products that people want to try out (and for less money — most boxes can be bought at a price lower than the total value of the products inside)." Alongside these consumer benefits, this can also "deepen relationships with advertisers and diversify its eCommerce offerings," they note[59].



The InStyle Cosmic Collection beauty box. It also includes a year's subscription to the magazine.

Product subscriptions can take other forms too. Men's Health UK launched[60] a food delivery service, called "Fuel," in summer 2020. With a rotation of 180 recipes, subscribers can choose from one of four different meal plans, depending on their goals. Prices range between £6.99 - £8.99 per meal[61].

Other ideas

Beyond online stores and subscription boxes, there are other eCommerce activities that publishers are also pursuing. These are not as prevalent but are sources of revenue generation that are worth monitoring and considering.

Membership Schemes

Accessories and beauty products might be the most obvious uses for subscription boxes, however, a number of publishers have long tapped into this model for another product: wine.

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The Sunday Times Wine Club might be the oldest of these services. Launched in 1973, it counts over 23,000 UK wine lovers among its membership and notes that "we're one of the world's most successful home-delivery wine merchants, with over 40 years experience and over 700,000 customers across the globe."[62]

It offers a raft of products and services, from quarterly delivery of cases (with tasting notes), through to a podcast, special events, as well as access to Wine Advisors, and the ability to buy wine from them for your wedding.

For affiliate partners, they offer a 5% commission on sales, a conversion rate of 5.5% and an average order value of £116[63].

On the other side of the pond, NPR[64], The New York Times and Eater, are examples of U.S. companies dabbling in this domain.

Local publishers can also get involved. Strategically this makes sense for those, like The Oregonian - a newspaper based in Portland, Oregon - that are situated in wine country. The paper partnered[65] with Cellar 503, a local wine club, back in 2018 to launch its programme.



Logo highlighting the Cellar 503 (Portland's Area Code) and The Oregonian partnership

Member benefits include: access to complimentary tastings, discounts, referral bonuses, members-only pricing for Cellar 503 special events (such as Pour Oregon, their annual wine festival), a discount card to use at over 75 of their winery partners, and special pricing if you want to rent Cellar 503's tasting room[66].



The homepage for the NPR Wine Club

Products come from all 21 Oregon wine regions, and smaller vineyards, wineries producing less than 10,000 cases a year.

Rachel del Valle, a writer living in New York, reported at the end of 2020 that "some [wine] clubs have seen an increase in signups since the pandemic began in March," a trend which may well have continued due to some people's COVID-era drinking habits[67].

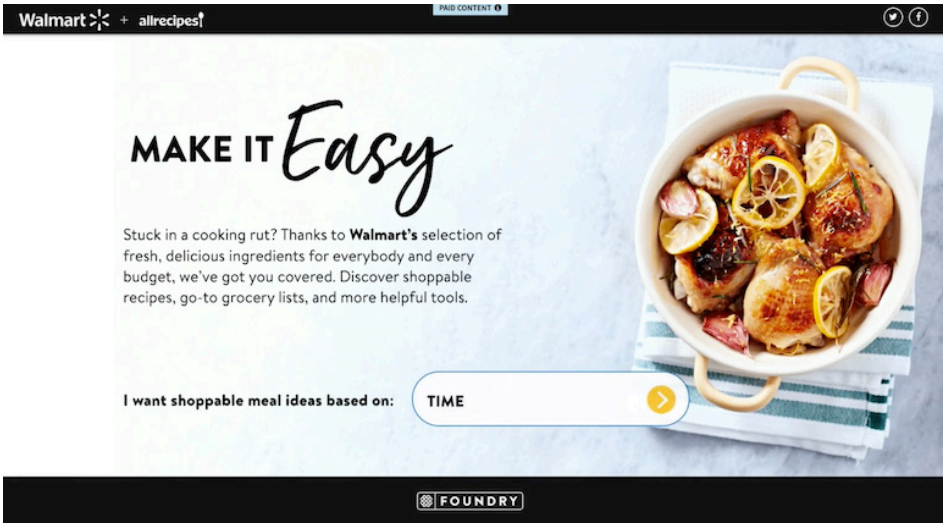
Retail partnerships

Meredith announced in September 2021, that it would be partnering[68] with Walmart, using AI to support meal planning and shoppable recipes, using visual search, chatbots, virtual assistants and social media.

With titles including Allrecipes, Better Homes & Gardens, Parents, EatingWell and Real Simple in their portfolio, Meredith

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reaches 95% of U.S. women through their different media properties. "Meal plan" related articles and content is projected to be up 30% across their sites in 2021.



Via Supermarket News

In a press release, the companies commented on how the partnership would incorporate a number of proprietary tools and content, including: "Meredith content taxonomy and predictive insights — including concept demand curves," as well as "visual search technology will enable consumers to photograph ingredients that they have on hand and get meal suggestions using those ingredients". It also included a shoppable "bookazine" called "Allrecipes 30 Minute Meals," with editor-curated recipes, that can only be purchased at Walmart stores.

The move isn't Walmart's first media partnership. BuzzFeed's Tasty brand has had a long-running association with what is the USA's largest retailer (with global sales[69] in 2020 double that of Amazon) and the world's largest grocer.

In late-2017, Tasty's step-by-step recipe videos began[70] to include links to buy products featured in the videos from Walmart.com and Jet.com (owned by Walmart). By early-2018, this was expanded[71] to include a range of Tasty-branded cookware that was exclusive to Walmart, followed[72] a year later by the introduction of "shoppable recipes."

As BuzzFeed excitedly told its readers:

> "When you're scrolling through the Tasty app and see a recipe you want to make (like sushi rice dip, for example), you can tap a button to buy the ingredients needed and have them ready for curbside pickup. Wow, such convenience!"

BuzzFeed reported revenue was up 51% in Q2 2021[73], with numbers published in September showing that commerce and other revenue increased 82% to $17.1 million year-on-year at the publisher.



Via YouTube

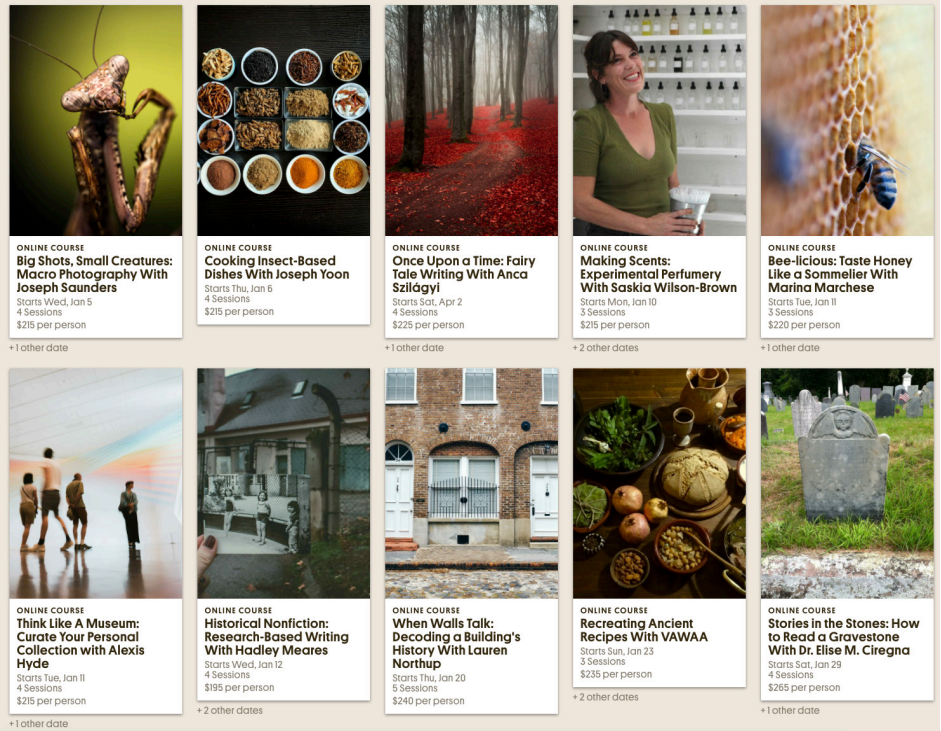
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Classes & courses

Some publishers have long offered classes. The travel magazine Wanderlust, for example, has offered photography courses around the world (I undertook one in Marrakesh back in 2008).

Newer kids on the travelling and exploring block, like Culture Trip and Atlas Obscura, have similarly moved into offering real-world and - online - experiences, the latter in response to the challenges of physical travel during a global pandemic.

B2B providers can also offer online courses.



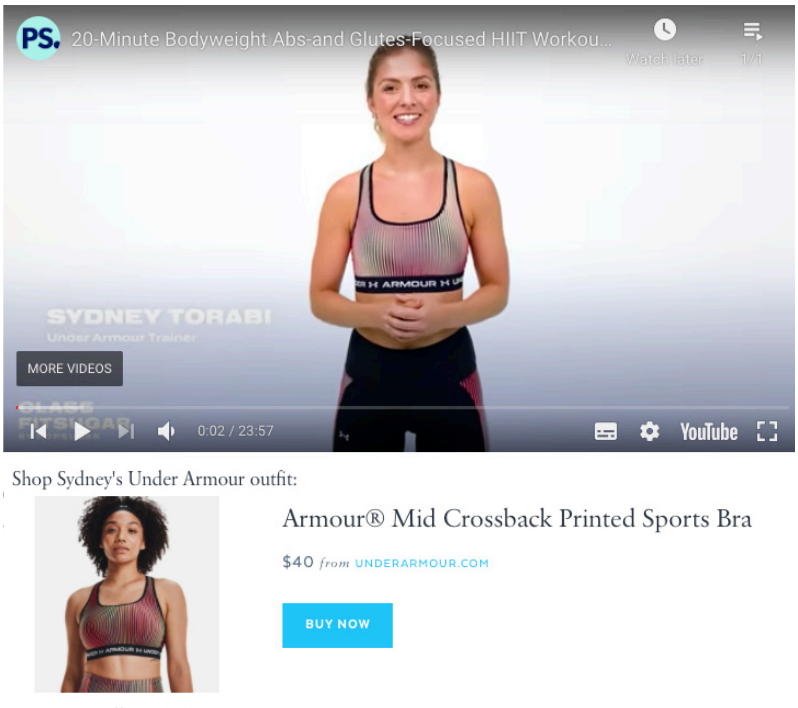
Some of the online courses offered by Atlas Obscura (December 2021)

ZDNet Academy describes itself as "an ongoing education repository for training and certifications for technical professionals."

Alongside the ability to undertake online courses, they also highlight deals on products that may be of interest to their readers; such as noise-cancelling headphones. (*Disclaimer, I write a monthly column for ZDNet and have done since late-2013.*)

Meanwhile, leaning into the pandemic has encouraged publishers like Hearst (Men's Health, Women's Health, Runner's World, Cosmo) to offer online fitness classes. That's a space that other outlets - like POPSUGAR - are also active in.

POPSUGAR decided[74] in March 2020 to make its planned paid-for monthly subscription fitness app, Active by POPSUGAR, "free of charge for the foreseeable future." The app and website offer a wide range of workouts (more than 500) with many of them sponsored by clothing and sports drink companies, and featuring affiliates links through to the attire worn by the trainer.



POPSUGAR's affiliate linking in action

Alongside efforts to maintain fitness during the pandemic, many homeowners have also seen lockdowns and restricted travel as an opportunity for home improvement.

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Family Handyman DIY University, from Trusted Media Brands, offers a range of free and paid-for classes focussed on DIY projects.

An offshoot of their print magazine, the direct-to-consumer product revealed[75] that transactions in April 2020 increased by 53 per cent and revenue rose 72 per cent year-over-year, in the midst of stay-at-home orders around the world.

Some of their most popular classes that month included “How to Power Your Home with Renewable Energy,” “How to Build a Backyard Shed” and “How to Build a Deck.”

As we can see, through the utilisation of online stores nestled into websites, subscription boxes and other programmes, product focussed membership schemes, as well as retail partnerships and opportunities for online courses and classes, publishers are going beyond affiliate to also explore other means to engage in eCommerce.

Some of these ideas have been around for some time. Others are becoming more commonplace, reflecting increasingly standard website architecture, and COVID-era consumer realities.



Front cover of Family Handyman, October 2021

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Implementation: three strategic considerations

What publishers need to consider when thinking about moving into - or deepening their engagement in - the eCommerce space.

A number of publishers were already embracing the potential for eCommerce[76]. However, the growth of the subscription economy[77], coupled with changing COVID-era consumer habits - and the likelihood of their continuation - has encouraged more media players into the eCommerce fold.

In December 2021, the Wall Street Journal announced[78] it was to launch a commerce offering focused on providing audiences with product and service recommendations. Meanwhile, companies such as Meredith and Future continue[79] to see their eCommerce profits grow.

Against this backdrop of increased consumer spending on eCommerce, greater engagement from media players, as well as the continued evolution of online shopping habits, it is not surprising that more publishers are asking whether eCommerce is a fit for their business.

With that in mind, here are three key considerations for publishers looking to move into - or deepen their engagement in - this space.

1: Cultural and content fit

The first question that publishers need to address is whether eCommerce is right for their brand(s) or audiences. Online shopping won't work for every title, or vertical, whereas there are others (reviews, travel, cooking etc.) where it's a more obvious extension to this output.

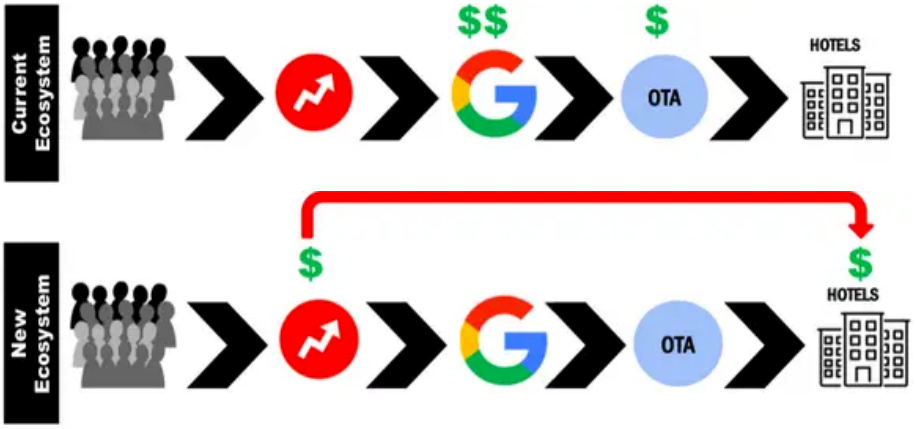
In this regard, publishers are tapping into what Jonah Peretti - BuzzFeed Founder & CEO - noted[80] in 2020 was the media's "attribution problem."

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Peretti observed how some "content creators provide the inspiration to buy a new product, go on a vacation, or watch a new show - but don't capture much of the economic value created," as consumers - suitably inspired by what they have read or seen - go elsewhere to make these purchases.

"We see a real opportunity for us to reclaim some of that profit," Peretti said, in a sentiment arguably applicable across much of the industry, not just BuzzFeed.

Arguably, the best eCommerce products are logical brand extensions[81], ones which build on the next steps a user may already have been planning to undertake.



Graphics showing BuzzFeed's aspirations to bypass third parties to capture revenue

By way of an example, between November 18th and December 1st 2021, during a two week period that included Black Friday and Cyber Monday, Future plc saw more than 1.6 million sales transactions and $137 million in eCommerce sales across North America. Much of this was driven by audiences coming to their sites with a purchase already in mind.

"Technology publications at Future - including Tom's Guide and TechRadar - experienced a 21% increase in page views and drove the highest sales over the Black Friday period, where the top products were gaming hardware, computers and laptops," they stated in a press release[82].

In a similar vein, brand extensions such as Tasty's partnerships with Walmart, have been logical forays for BuzzFeed. Audiences might be inspired by the videos and recipes they have seen, so the next step is to make it easier for them to buy the ingredients and kitchenware that they need to make this at home.

Similarly, Trusted Media Brands' decision to launch cookware and bakeware - as well as a quarterly subscription box - based around their Taste of Home publication, and Marie Claire's Beauty Drawer[83] (an "editorially approved bespoke beauty sampling service"), also feel like natural continuations of the consumer journey. These moves are a good cultural fit for the relationship audiences already have with these publications.



Taste of Home's Special Delivery subscription box (December 2021)

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2: Application challenges

Cultural fit isn't just about brand alignment and the consumer journey. It also has the potential to change hiring practices across the business, the types of partnerships you embark on, as well as redefine elements of your editorial proposition.

At many publishers, eCommerce leaders come from technology, sales or product backgrounds. They seldom come out of the newsroom. This reflects the types of skills and experience that are typically needed to implement successful eCommerce strategies.

In January 2022, Hearst announced[84] that April Lane had been named their chief eCommerce officer. Lane had previously spent just under 12 years at Amazon.

This followed news[85] in December 2021 that Hearst is creating "The Tower" a luxury eCommerce marketplace launching in Spring 2022. Featuring online stories from Elle, Bazaar, Town & Country and Esquire, the move is led by the fashion and retail industry veteran Ken Downing, who was made the chief brand officer of Hearst Luxury Collection Commerce.

Aside from broadening their team by adding people with a broader range of business, UX and marketing skills, publishers may also have to navigate an editorial tightrope.

As a feature in Folio on affiliate marketing – just one facet of eCommerce – observed back in 2019[86], "talk of optimizing conversions against content are still fighting words for many editors and will always raise questions about the integrity of content decisions."

eCommerce's potential to challenge church and state traditions means that there needs to be clarity - for newsrooms and audiences alike - around how eCommerce may shape editorial decision making and the nature of any possible financial relationships.



The homepage for The Strategist - highlighting by the author - showing how the site references commissions and their editorial independence (December 2021)

One way to address this is to provide clear statements on your website, and individual articles, about how any affiliate dynamics

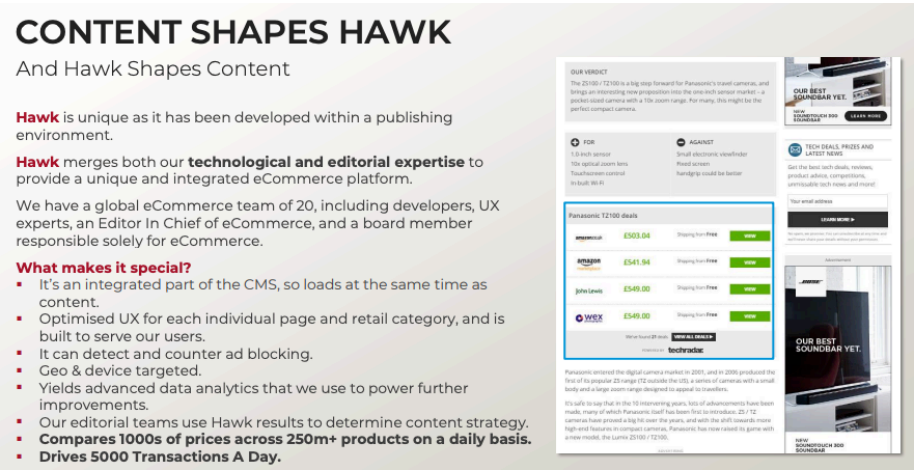
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work, as well as the editorial process that shapes content reviews and other content.

A further area of important consideration for publishers is in the area of partnerships. This comes in a myriad of different forms, from technology providers to fulfilment.

Some of these efforts are produced in house. Future's proprietary tech stack enables the company "to drive almost instant revenue growth," Abi Watson, a senior research analyst at Enders Analysis told Digiday[87]. At the heart of this is Hawk, which compares prices of products from sellers across the internet in real-time.

Lastly, there's also a recognition that publishers need to balance their editorial mission and revenue interests. In particular, there's a risk that bombarding consumers with messages and affiliate links may be off-putting. Yet, at the same time, there are certain sites where too much content (e.g. fashion, reviews) may have the same effect and reduce the likelihood of an online purchase.



Hawk, from Future PLC's 2018 eCommerce pack

There's no one size fits all solution to this conundrum. The sweet spot will differ from publication and vertical, which is why metrics and data are integral to these efforts[88].

3: Changing technological realities

As eCommerce becomes increasingly engrained across our media experiences, our ability to make purchases online is easier than ever. This presents both challenges and opportunities for publishers and content creators.

Perhaps the most obvious of these is the potential thread of social commerce and the ability to make purchases on social networks, both on desktop and apps, on sites like Instagram, Pinterest and Facebook.

The latest Statista Digital Economy Compass indicates[89] that, on average, internet users spend 142 minutes a day on social networks. Although that figure is slightly down (by 3 minutes) from previous year's, that's still a lot of time each day.

eMarketer predicts[90] that U.S. social commerce sales will rise by 35.8% to $36.62 billion in 2021; arguably making this a marketplace that is too big for publishers to ignore. Media

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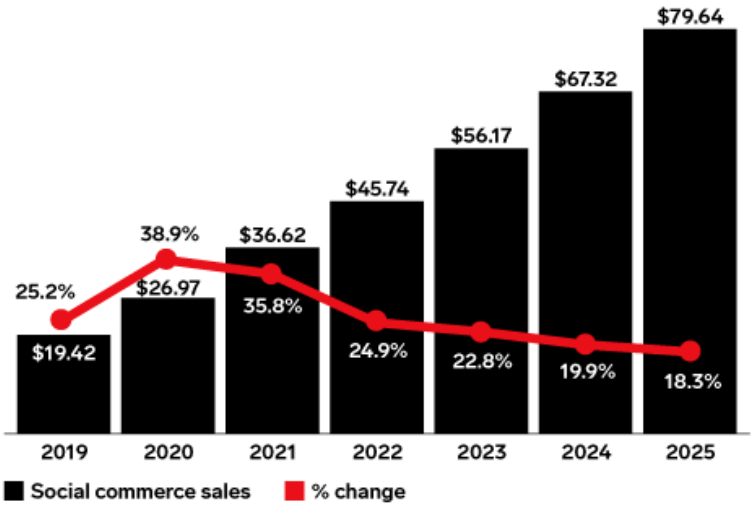
companies - and not just brands and influencers - need to be eyeing up the potential for eCommerce on these different social networks.

However, as Chris Sutcliffe cautioned in the Media Moments 2021 report[91]: "It is incumbent upon the traditional publishers to ensure they do not become over-reliant on those platforms for eCommerce and affiliate revenue as they once did for advertising revenue."

At the same time, some social platforms are also flexing their editorial chops. Amazon launched[92] its own TV shopping channel Amazon Live in 2019, while in October 2021, Pinterest announced they were working with brands and creators to launch Pinterest TV[93], a series of live, original and shoppable episodes on the network.

US retail social commerce sales, 2019-2025

billions and % change



Note: includes products or services ordered via social networks (such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, WeChat, Line, VK, and others) regardless of the method of payment or fulfillment; excludes travel and event tickets, tips, subscriptions, payments, such as bill pay, taxes or money transfers, food services and drinking place sales, gambling and other vice goods sales
Source: eMarketer, May 2021

Via eMarketer

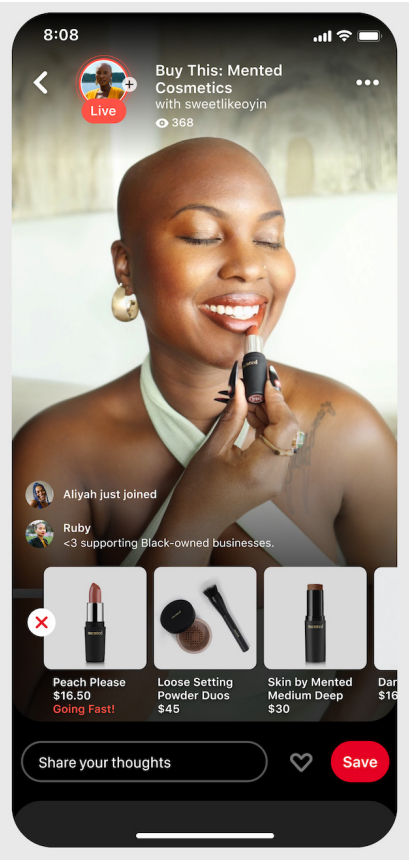
Much of this content is the type of material that has been a mainstay of magazines and cable shopping channels for years. The revenues that these have generated risk being cannibalized by digital platforms.

Publishers also need to be aware of other tech-led developments which may impact their eCommerce efforts. One of these is changes to Google's search algorithm.

In December the company decided to update[94] the way in which product review pages are ranked. Ostensibly designed to remove "fake" reviews and reward "authentic" and quality content, these efforts can potentially have a knock-on effect for publishers.

Aside from potentially changing the ranking of content on Google Search, it may also require publishers - and their partners - to do things differently. In this instance, Google said, "users have told us that they trust reviews with evidence of products actually being tested, and prefer to have more options to purchase the product."

As a result, the search giant determined[95] that best practices[96] - to take effect in a future update - should henceforth: "provide evidence such as visuals, audio, or other links of your own experience with the product, to support your expertise and reinforce the authenticity of your review," and "include links to multiple sellers to give the reader the option to purchase from their merchant of choice."



A demonstration of how Pinterest TV looks

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The emphasis on links to multiple vendors potentially aids publishers like Future who already prominently feature price comparisons on many of their sites. They also acquired the owner of the price comparison website Go Compare back in late-2020[97].

This purchase offered a number of potential benefits including a new avenue for revenues, deepening their tech stack and consumer data, as well as creating new content opportunities for editorial written around the types of products - such as broadband providers, car and home insurance, mortgages and other financial services - featured on the GoCompare website.

Sovrn Holdings (who co-sponsored this report and acquired Monetizer101, a price and merchant comparison shopping solutions provider for publishers such as Mail Online, TI Media and The Telegraph, in the summer of 2021) has also argued that these types of tools can drive more eCommerce revenue for publishers who use them.



Image via Sovrn

"Price comparisons can provide up to 179% higher earnings per click and up to 200% more clicks and conversions," they commented in a blog post[98] at the end of last year, also noting that "traditional affiliate links are limited, because they can only promote one merchant at a time." Subsequently, "if the product happens to be out of stock or the price isn't competitive, the consumer will shop elsewhere – and you'll miss out on the revenue."

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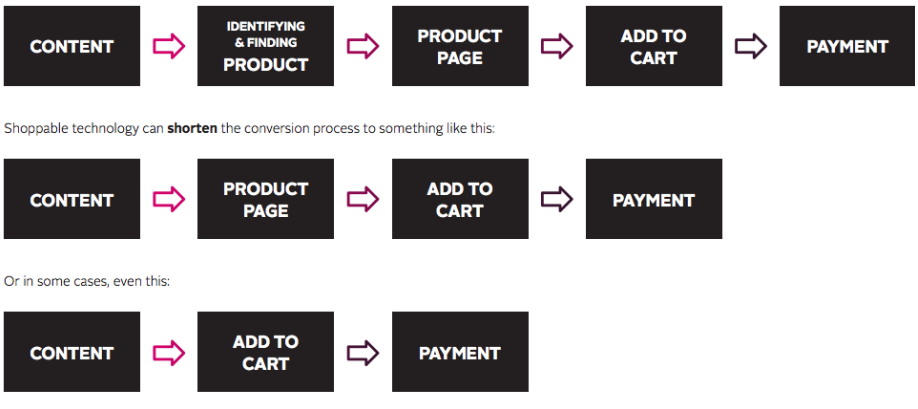
What next? Five eCommerce trends for publishers

In this final chapter we explore the biggest trends in eCommerce and their implications. These trends are already a consumer and technological reality, but they will only grow in prominence.

1: The future is frictionless

As we observed in our previous eCommerce report, publishers, retailers and other interested parties (such as social networks) are focused on creating as seamless an eCommerce experience as possible.

Put simply, this means that consumers will be able to complete a purchase in the minimum number of steps possible. As Google explains, "a frictionless experience encompasses product organization, pricing and availability, navigation, ease of checkout, and payment."[99]



How to create a more frictionless experience. Via Styla and Digital Doughnut

Reducing these points of friction increases conversion rates and reduces consumer frustration with the purchase process. Moreover, as Google further notes, we increasingly expect this type of functionality as standard.

> "The pandemic has reinforced what brands and retailers should continue to focus on: enabling people to shop when they want, how they want, and where they want, all the while providing a pleasant and frictionless experience. Or, put another way, brands need to structure teams and budgets with an omnichannel mindset and focus on possible pain points."[100]

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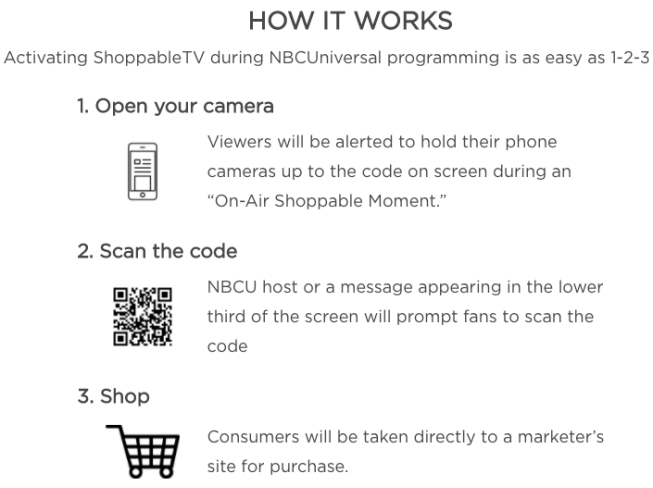
2: Shoppable content

Building on the need for as frictionless an eCommerce experience as possible, one way that this is manifesting itself is through the growth of shoppable content. As Digiday observes[101], this appears to be "the next frontier for digital video advertising."

Shoppable content is another pre-pandemic development that has only become more relevant and prominent, as eCommerce opportunities become more ubiquitous.

For print publishers, technological advances have made it possible for them to offer readers the opportunity to snap images with the camera on their phone and use this to then purchase products online.

In the first half of 2021 one of the first publishers to pioneer this, Bauer Media, partnered[102] with image-recognition platform Phuzion Media to feature this service in Grazia and heat magazines. One key driver was that Bauer's research found[103] more than 1 in 3 people were reading magazines during the UK's third lockdown, with 11% indicating they were reading more magazines than in the 12 months prior to the pandemic.



How shoppable TV works, via NBCUniversal

Bauer's move stressed[104] how this innovation removed the need for consumers to scan QR codes, the predominant means for previous shoppable content efforts.

The humble QR code, however, has not only had a resurgence[105] during the pandemic, but it is also core to moves such as ShoppableTV service provided by NBCUniversal in the USA.

Prompted by an on-screen QR code, viewers can purchase an item seen during a show or the ad break. The company says its eCommerce conversion rates are 30% above the industry average.



Via Condé Nast

The streaming platform Hulu is also investing[106] in QR code-led shopping, and Amazon is testing a feature that enables viewers to make a purchase while watching an ad on IMDb TV (which they own), using Alexa or a Fire TV remote.

Shoppable video is not just the purview of TV networks and streaming providers.

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Condé Nast has also integrated shoppable technology into its video content. “Shoppable series,” they noted in a press release[107], “include Vogue’s "7 Days 7 Looks" and "Beauty Secrets" and GQ’s "Grooming Gods," each of which will give viewers the ability to instantly purchase the products showcased by their favourite celebrities, models and influencers.”

One reason for these developments is that “consumer behaviour has changed,” Evan Moore, vice president of commerce partnerships at NBCU, told[108] eMarketer last year.

> “Before, consumer behaviour was asynchronous, where you might see an advertisement and be inspired to consider or try a new brand. And then that was something that was lodged in your head, and you maybe acted on it weeks or months later while at the mall. Now any shopping attempt you have can be immediately acted on through either your mobile device or desktop while watching a TV program.”

As the Morning Brew newsletter put it[109], “Everything is QVC now.”

3: Social commerce

Our ability to act on impulse, and in as frictionless a manner as possible, is also integral to social commerce, the ability to make online purchases within apps and social networks like Instagram, Pinterest and Facebook.

“Social commerce is what happens when savvy marketers take the best of e-commerce and combine it with social media,” Hootsuite says[110]. In late-2020 they commented that “social commerce is a[n] $89.4 billion market right now. It’s projected to grow to $604.5 billion in the next seven years.”

This growth is driven by a myriad of factors, some technological, others more grounded in how we use these channels and their prevalence in our media habits.



Via Vogue Business, showcasing Snapchat’s “Try It On” AR tool.

After all, we spend a considerable amount of time on social networks. “The typical user actively uses or visits an average of 6.7 different social media platforms each month, and spends an average of close to 2½ hours using social media each day,” Kepios reveals[111].

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Given this level of attention, it's no surprise that platforms are seeking to monetize our engagement.

Within that, finding inspiration for things to buy, and finding products to purchase, are cited by more than a quarter of internet users worldwide as a main reason for using social media.

As a result, visual social networks like Pinterest[112] and Instagram[113], alongside the brands and influencers on them, are increasingly exploring a broad range of eCommerce opportunities, and it's a logical extension for users to be able to purchase the products that they have seen.

Shopping based tools and functionality can also be a differentiator for social networks.

Snapchat's "Try It On" feature uses augmented reality (AR) to enable[114] users to see how beauty or fashion products might look on them. How long before publishers, as standard, offer the same functionality for products that grace their (online or printed) pages?

NBCUniversal is also foraying[115] into AR, having created a "Virtual Bravo Bazaar," an augmented reality-driven website where fans can buy products associated with shows on its Bravo channel, including the "Below Deck" and "Real Housewives" franchises.

4: Live shopping

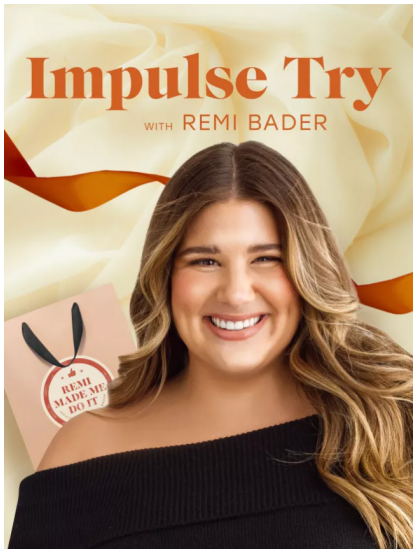
App Annie's recent 'Evolution of Social Apps' report[116] estimates that "consumers will spend $6.78 billion via social apps this year – rising to $17.2 billion annually by 2025."

Much of this stems from "gifting" content creators during live streams, as viewers "tip" their favourite streamers. But, alongside this, live shopping events on social networks are also significant drivers of traffic and consumer spending.

In China, 37% of online shoppers in China (265 million people) made purchases on live streams In 2019, TechCrunch reports[117], stressing "that was well before quarantine," and the bump the pandemic has given eCommerce. In 2020, that number is estimated to have grown to around 560 million people.

Livestream shopping is also available on multiple Silicon Valley-based platforms too. Facebook[118], Instagram[119], TikTok[120] and Pinterest[121] among those exploring various opportunities to integrate this into their eCommerce strategies.

"If you were wondering why every app is looking to move into in-stream commerce, this is it," says[122] Social Media Today's Andrew Hutchinson. "The data points to [a] significant opportunity for those platforms that can expand user engagement into direct



Via Broadcasting & Cable

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spending and shopping behaviours, facilitating new revenue potential for the platforms, and new opportunities for brands."

BuzzFeed has been an early adopter of this format. In the first half of 2021, they hosted more than 50 livestreams on Amazon Live, including a 16-hour-long broadcast on Amazon Prime Day in June. The broadcast generated over 1 million views on Amazon and Facebook Live, they told[123] Digiday.

NBCUniversal worked with TikTok star Remi Bader to create[124] an interactive livestream shopping show series over the recent Thanksgiving weekend.

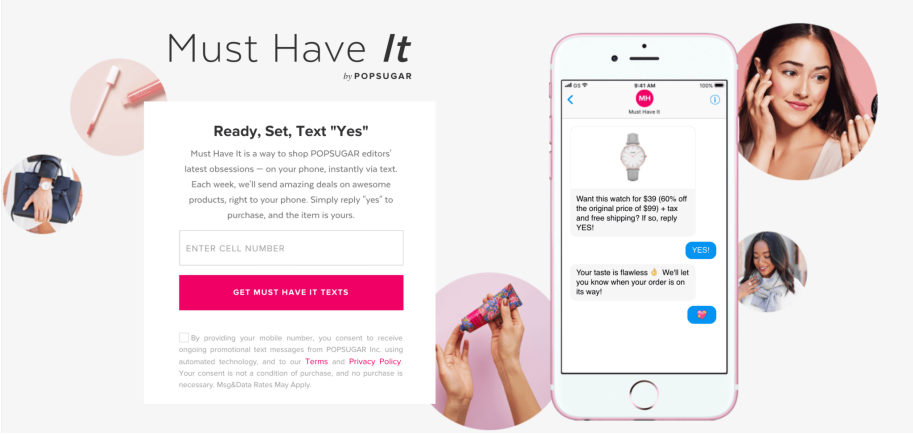
Hosted on Instagram and Facebook, the content was later rebroadcast on their Peacock streaming platform and the NBC App, with personalities from their Bravo TV channel making appearances on the shows.

5: New ways of paying for products

Publishers have experimented with the ability for audiences to purchase their content using methods like cryptocurrency (see, for example, Chicago Sun-Times, Time, Brainpickings), while POPSUGAR experimented[125] with selling products via text.

In terms of current trends, publishers may also need to consider other developments such as the emerging practice of buy-now-pay-later (BNPL).

As Investopedia explains[126], this "is a type of short-term financing that allows consumers to make purchases and pay for them at a future date, often interest-free." "If approved," they add, "you make a small down payment, such as 25% of the overall purchase amount. You then pay off the remaining amount due in a series of interest-free instalments."



Via the POPSUGAR website, 2019

Mastercard, PayPal and Shopify are among those offering these types of payments, as do a growing number of major retailers.

As this practice becomes engrained in our retail behaviours, so we can expect that publishers too will need to incorporate this into their eCommerce offerings.

In fact, some already do. And as a growing number of the third parties that publishers work with factor this into their services, we can expect this number to only increase.

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Not surprisingly, some of the early adopters of this practice are among publishers for whom eCommerce is already a core part of their business.

At the end of last year, AdWeek pointed out[127] how "publishers like BuzzFeed, and soon Bustle Digital Group, have taken deferred payment tech a step further, marrying the tech with their new onsite shopping capabilities."

"When paired, publishers can replicate the experience of a contemporary retail website," AdWeek wrote, "letting customers browse, add to their cart and use deferred payment to purchase items such as beauty products, cookware and clothing."

Similarly, bringing many of these different emerging eCommerce elements together, Cosmopolitan Magazine partnered[128] with a leading BNPL shopping and payments platform, Klarna, for a two-day virtual shopping event, Hauliday.



Via WWD

Specifically targeting Gen Z and millennials in the US, this was their second annual event, but the first to include a livestream shopping component.

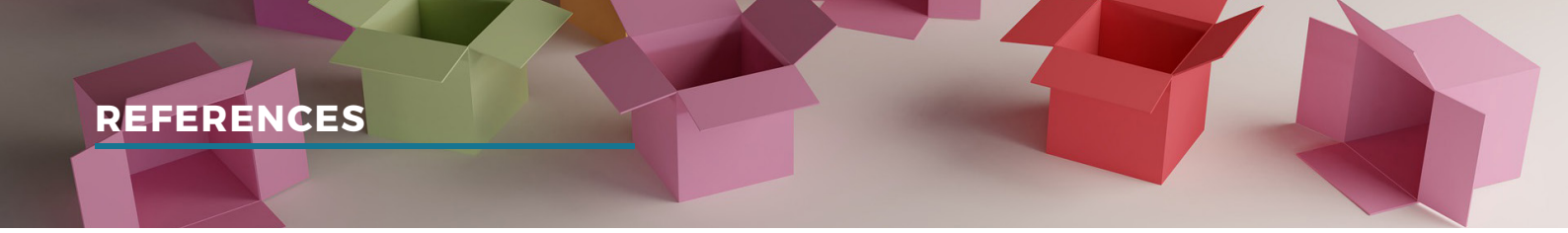
As publishers expand their eCommerce offerings, they will increasingly need to partner with platforms, retailers and other service providers to ensure that they can offer the type of online shopping experiences that consumers are getting used to.

If they don't, then they risk being left behind, and much of eCommerce's potential for publishers will go unrealised.

As a result, publishers will need to factor in opportunities for onsite purchases, alongside being able to shop on social networks, integrating shoppable articles and videos, as well as flexible payment options, into their architecture. These features will be essential if publishers want to be seen as bona fide retailers.

Ultimately, as Kate Robinson, svp of content distribution and partnerships at BDG explains[129], in a sentiment applicable to all of publishers' eCommerce efforts: "If we want to compete against online retailers, we need to offer consumers the same experience and options as they do."

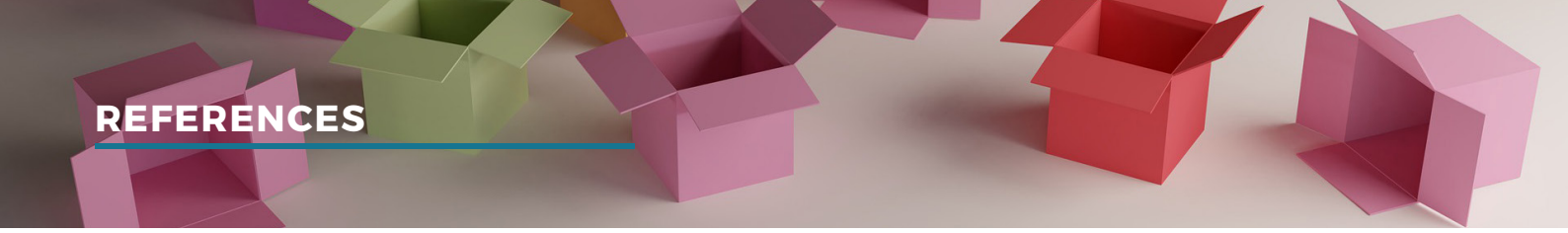
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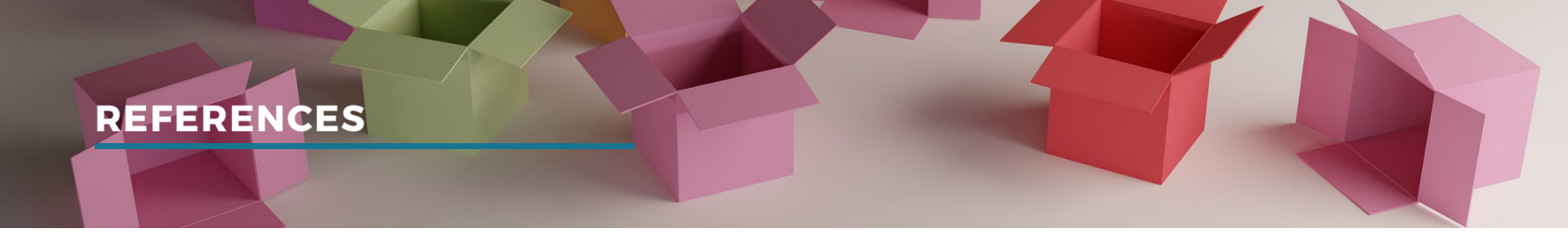
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