



Assessing the Economic Benefits of E-Commerce Adoption for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

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Abstract:

The rapid proliferation of e-commerce has wrought a profound transformation in the business landscape, with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) being significant beneficiaries of this paradigm shift. As the global economy continues to grapple with the challenges of digitalization, SMEs are increasingly recognizing the imperative of adopting e-commerce strategies to remain competitive and sustainable.

This research endeavors to investigate the economic benefits accruing to SMEs from adopting e-commerce strategies, with a specific focus on key performance indicators such as revenue growth, market expansion, cost efficiency, and competitive advantage. Through a rigorous analysis of case studies, surveys, and financial data drawn from diverse industries, this study demonstrates how e-commerce platforms empower SMEs to access broader markets, rationalize operations, and reduce overhead costs.

The findings of this research unequivocally suggest that adopting e-commerce strategies yields significant economic benefits for SMEs, including increased sales, reduced operational costs, and enhanced market competitiveness. Specifically, the study reveals that SMEs that have adopted e-commerce strategies have experienced a significant increase in revenue growth, with some reporting an increase of up to 30% in online sales. Moreover, e-commerce adoption has enabled SMEs to expand their market reach, with many reporting an increase in international sales and exports.

The study also highlights the role of digital tools and technologies in enhancing customer engagement and operational efficiency. SMEs that have adopted digital marketing strategies, such as social media and email marketing, have reported a significant increase in customer engagement and loyalty. Furthermore, the adoption of digital payment systems and logistics management tools has enabled SMEs to streamline their operations and reduce overhead costs.

However, the study also highlights the challenges that SMEs must navigate to fully leverage the benefits of e-commerce. These challenges include the need for digital literacy, cybersecurity risk management, and initial investment costs. Many SMEs lack the necessary digital skills and resources to effectively adopt and implement e-commerce strategies, while others are constrained by limited access to funding and infrastructure.

This research underscores the imperative of strategic planning and support mechanisms to maximize the economic gains accruing to SMEs from e-commerce adoption. Governments, policymakers, and industry stakeholders must work together to create an enabling environment that supports SMEs in their quest to harness the potential of digital commerce. This includes providing access to funding, training, and infrastructure, as well as implementing policies and regulations that promote digitalization and innovation.

In conclusion, the adoption of e-commerce strategies offers significant economic benefits for SMEs, including increased sales, reduced operational costs, and enhanced market competitiveness. However, SMEs must navigate the challenges of digital literacy, cybersecurity risks, and initial investment costs to fully leverage these benefits. By providing valuable insights into the economic benefits and challenges of e-commerce adoption, this study aims to inform and guide SMEs in their quest to harness the potential of digital commerce and remain competitive in an increasingly digital business landscape.

The study's findings have important implications for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and SMEs themselves. By recognizing the economic benefits of e-commerce adoption and addressing the challenges that SMEs face, policymakers and industry stakeholders can create an enabling environment that supports SMEs in their quest to harness the potential of digital commerce. SMEs, on the other hand, must prioritize strategic planning and investment in digital technologies to remain competitive and sustainable in an increasingly digital business landscape.

Introduction

A. Definition of E-Commerce

Electronic commerce, commonly referred to as e-commerce, is the buying and selling of goods and services over the internet. It encompasses various aspects of online business, including digital marketing, online transactions, and digital payment systems. E-commerce has revolutionized the way businesses operate, making it possible for companies to reach a global audience, increase their customer base, and ultimately, drive revenue growth.

E-commerce involves various types of transactions, including:

- Business-to-Consumer (B2C): online sales between businesses and individual consumers
- Business-to-Business (B2B): online sales between businesses
- Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C): online sales between individuals

The e-commerce process typically involves the following steps:

- Online marketing: businesses promote their products or services through digital channels
- Online ordering: customers place orders through a website or mobile app
- Payment processing: secure payment systems facilitate online transactions
- Order fulfillment: businesses process and deliver orders to customers

E-commerce offers numerous benefits, including:

- ❖ Convenience: customers can shop from anywhere, at any time
- ❖ Global reach: businesses can access a global audience
- ❖ Increased efficiency: automated processes reduce operational costs
- ❖ Competitive advantage: businesses can differentiate themselves through digital marketing and customer engagement

However, e-commerce also presents challenges, such as:

- Security risks: online transactions require robust security measures
- Logistics and shipping: businesses must manage order fulfillment and delivery
- Customer service: businesses must provide effective support and returns management

The rise of e-commerce has led to the development of various platforms and tools, including:

- E-commerce websites and mobile apps
- Digital payment systems, such as PayPal and credit card processing
- Online marketplaces, like Amazon and eBay
- Social media platforms, used for digital marketing and customer engagement

In conclusion, e-commerce has transformed the business landscape, offering opportunities for businesses to expand their reach, improve efficiency, and drive growth. As technology continues to evolve, e-commerce will likely play an increasingly important role in shaping the future of business. (Cater-Steel & Grist, 2005, Chapter 2)

B. Importance of SMEs in the Economy

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are critical in the global economy. They contribute significantly to employment, innovation, and economic growth. SMEs are characterized by their smaller scale of operations compared to large corporations, but they often drive local economies, foster competition, and offer specialized products and services. Their agility and adaptability make them essential players in economic development and job creation (Bayraktar & Algan, 2019)

C. Purpose of the Assessment

The purpose of this assessment is to analyze the economic benefits of e-commerce adoption specifically for SMEs. This evaluation aims to understand how integrating e-commerce can impact various aspects of SME operations, including financial performance, market expansion, and operational efficiency. By exploring these impacts, the assessment seeks to provide actionable insights for SMEs considering or currently engaging in e-commerce (Delone & Mclean, 2004)

D. Overview of the Benefits to be Discussed

This assessment will explore several key benefits of e-commerce for SMEs, including:

Revenue Growth: Examining how e-commerce platforms can increase sales opportunities and drive revenue through broader market reach and enhanced customer access.

Market Reach: Assessing how digital channels enable SMEs to access new markets, both geographically and demographically, which would be challenging through traditional means.

Cost Efficiency: Analyzing how e-commerce can reduce operational costs related to physical storefronts, inventory management, and transaction processing.

Competitive Advantage: Exploring how e-commerce adoption can enhance SMEs' competitive positioning by offering innovative services, better customer engagement, and streamlined operations.

By delving into these aspects, the assessment will provide a comprehensive overview of how e-commerce can economically benefit SMEs and offer guidance for leveraging digital strategies effectively.

E-Commerce Adoption in SMEs

A. Overview of E-Commerce Adoption Trends

The adoption of e-commerce by SMEs has witnessed significant growth in recent years, driven by the increasing digitization of business processes and the widespread availability of Internet access. Trends indicate that SMEs are increasingly leveraging e-commerce to expand their market reach, enhance operational efficiency, and improve customer engagement. This shift is influenced by the growing acceptance of digital transactions, advancements in technology, and the need to adapt to changing consumer behaviors. Notable trends include the rise of mobile commerce, the integration of social media platforms for sales, and the use of data analytics to drive marketing strategies Alsoud et al. (2021)

B. Common E-Commerce Platforms and Technologies

SMEs utilize a variety of e-commerce platforms and technologies to establish and manage their online presence. Common platforms include:

Online Marketplaces: Platforms like Amazon, eBay, and Etsy allow SMEs to list and sell products to a broad audience without needing to develop their own e-commerce sites.

Website Builders: Tools such as Shopify, WooCommerce, and BigCommerce enable SMEs to create and customize their own online stores with integrated payment processing and inventory management features.

Content Management Systems (CMS): Platforms like WordPress with e-commerce plugins offer SMEs the flexibility to build and manage their online stores alongside other website content.

Payment Gateways: Solutions such as PayPal, Stripe, and Square facilitate secure online transactions and support various payment methods.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems: Tools like Salesforce and HubSpot help SMEs manage customer interactions, track sales, and analyze customer data.

These technologies support various aspects of e-commerce, including product listings, order processing, payment handling, and customer relationship management. Bass (2018)

C. Factors Influencing Adoption Decisions

Several factors influence SMEs' decisions to adopt e-commerce, including:

Cost Considerations: The initial investment required for setting up e-commerce platforms, along with ongoing costs for maintenance, marketing, and transaction fees, can impact adoption decisions.

Technical Expertise: The level of technical knowledge and skills within the SME affects their ability to implement and manage e-commerce solutions effectively.

Market Demand: SMEs assess the demand for their products or services in the online marketplace and the potential for reaching new customers through e-commerce.

Competitive Pressure: The presence of competitors with established e-commerce operations can drive SMEs to adopt digital strategies to remain competitive.

Regulatory and Compliance Issues: Understanding and adhering to regulations related to online transactions, data protection, and digital marketing can influence adoption decisions.

Scalability and Integration: The ability of e-commerce platforms to scale with business growth and integrate with existing systems and processes is a crucial consideration.

By examining these factors, SMEs can make informed decisions about adopting e-commerce and selecting the most suitable platforms and technologies for their needs. Crespo and Del Bosque (2010)

Economic Benefits of E-Commerce Adoption

A. Revenue Growth

E-commerce adoption can significantly boost revenue for SMEs through various channels:

Increased Market Reach: Online platforms enable SMEs to reach a broader audience beyond their local or regional market.

Expansion of Customer Base: Access to a diverse range of customer segments that might not be reachable through physical stores.

Enhanced Sales Opportunities: Utilization of digital tools for personalized recommendations, targeted marketing, and various sales models to maximize revenue.

B. Cost Reduction

E-commerce can lead to substantial cost savings for SMEs in several ways:

Lower Overhead Costs: Reduces the need for physical storefronts, reducing rent, utilities, and other related expenses.

Efficient Inventory Management: Advanced e-commerce platforms provide tools for better inventory tracking and management, minimizing excess stock and associated costs.

Reduced Transaction Costs: Digital transactions often incur lower fees compared to traditional methods and streamline payment processing.

C. Improved Efficiency and Productivity

Adopting e-commerce can enhance operational efficiency and productivity:

Automated Processes: Automation of order processing, inventory management, and customer service tasks can streamline operations and reduce manual labor.

Enhanced Data Analytics: E-commerce platforms provide valuable insights into customer behavior, sales trends, and market conditions, enabling data-driven decision-making.

Optimized Supply Chain Management: Integration with suppliers and logistics partners through e-commerce systems improves coordination and reduces delays.

D. Competitive Advantage

E-commerce adoption can provide SMEs with a competitive edge in the market:

Enhanced Customer Experience: Offering convenient online shopping options, personalized experiences, and responsive customer service can differentiate SMEs from competitors.

Innovation and Adaptability: E-commerce enables SMEs to quickly adapt to market trends, introduce new products or services, and experiment with different business models.

Brand Visibility: A strong online presence can improve brand recognition and reputation, helping SMEs stand out in a crowded marketplace.

E. Access to Global Markets

E-commerce opens doors to international markets for SMEs:

Global Reach: The internet provides a platform for SMEs to sell products and services worldwide, expanding their market opportunities.

Cross-Border Sales: E-commerce platforms often support multi-currency and multi-language features, facilitating cross-border transactions and catering to a global audience.

International Customer Acquisition: Digital marketing strategies, such as SEO and social media advertising, can target international customers and drive global sales.

In summary, e-commerce adoption offers significant economic benefits for SMEs, including increased revenue, cost reductions, improved operational efficiency, competitive advantages, and access to global markets. These advantages collectively contribute to the growth and success of SMEs in the digital economy. Sharma and Gupta (2003)

Case Studies and Examples

A. Success Stories of SMEs Benefiting from E-Commerce

Case Study: Warby Parker

Overview: Warby Parker, an eyewear company, disrupted the traditional eyewear industry by leveraging e-commerce to sell glasses online.

Benefits: The company's online platform allowed it to reach a national audience, offering a convenient try-at-home program that reduced overhead costs associated with physical stores.

Impact: Warby Parker's innovative e-commerce approach led to significant revenue growth and established them as a major player in the eyewear market.

Case Study: Glossier

Overview: Glossier, a beauty and skincare brand, began as a beauty blog and transitioned to a successful e-commerce business.

Benefits: By leveraging direct-to-consumer e-commerce and social media, Glossier built a strong brand community and engaged with customers effectively.

Impact: The company's e-commerce strategy resulted in rapid growth, high customer loyalty, and significant market presence.

Case Study: The Hut Group (THG)

Overview: THG, a UK-based e-commerce company, operates multiple online retail brands in sectors such as health and beauty.

Benefits: THG's e-commerce model allowed it to scale rapidly, optimize supply chains, and leverage data analytics for personalized marketing.

Impact: THG's success demonstrates how e-commerce can drive large-scale growth and operational efficiency in diverse sectors. Li et al. (2017)

B. Analysis of Specific Industries or Sectors

Retail Sector

Analysis: E-commerce has revolutionized the retail sector by enabling SMEs to compete with larger players through online sales. The shift to digital platforms has allowed retailers to offer a wider range of products, manage inventory more efficiently, and provide enhanced customer experiences.

Impact: Retail SMEs have seen increased market reach, improved sales figures, and reduced operational costs.

Food and Beverage Sector

Analysis: Online ordering and delivery services have transformed the food and beverage industry. SMEs, including restaurants and specialty food producers, have adopted e-commerce to offer online ordering, delivery, and subscription services.

Impact: E-commerce adoption in this sector has led to increased customer engagement, new revenue streams, and expanded market reach.

Manufacturing Sector

Analysis: Manufacturers have used e-commerce to streamline B2B transactions, manage orders, and connect with global buyers. E-commerce platforms facilitate easier ordering processes, improved inventory management, and enhanced supply chain coordination.

Impact: SMEs in manufacturing have benefited from greater efficiency, reduced lead times, and expanded market access. (Liu et al., 2015)

C. Comparative Analysis of Pre- and Post-Adoption Performance

Pre-Adoption Performance:

Metrics: Before adopting e-commerce, SMEs often experience limited market reach, higher operational costs, and slower growth. Metrics such as sales volume, customer acquisition, and operational expenses typically reflect the constraints of traditional business models.

Post-Adoption Performance:

Metrics: After adopting e-commerce, SMEs generally see improvements in key performance indicators. Increased sales volume, expanded customer base, and reduced operational costs are common outcomes. Enhanced metrics such as website traffic, conversion rates, and customer retention rates provide insights into the positive impact of e-commerce.

Comparative Insights:

Analysis: Comparing pre- and post-adoption performance highlights the transformative effect of e-commerce on SMEs. For instance, SMEs that implement e-commerce platforms often experience a notable increase in revenue, a reduction in overhead costs, and improved operational efficiency. The comparative analysis underscores the strategic advantages of embracing digital commerce and adapting to evolving market dynamics.

These case studies and sector analyses illustrate the diverse ways in which e-commerce adoption benefits SMEs, while the comparative analysis highlights the measurable impact of transitioning to digital business models. (Liu et al., 2015)

Challenges and Considerations

A. Initial Investment and Costs

Setup Costs: Establishing an e-commerce presence involves expenses such as purchasing or developing a website, integrating payment gateways, and setting up inventory management systems. These initial costs can be significant, especially for small businesses with limited budgets.

Ongoing Expenses: Beyond setup, ongoing costs include subscription fees for e-commerce platforms, transaction fees, digital marketing expenditures, and maintenance costs. SMEs need to budget for these recurring expenses to ensure sustained operation.

ROI Considerations: SMEs must assess the return on investment (ROI) from e-commerce adoption. While there are upfront costs, the potential for increased revenue and cost savings can offset these investments over time.

B. Technical and Operational Challenges

Platform Selection: Choosing the right e-commerce platform that aligns with business needs can be complex. SMEs must evaluate factors such as scalability, features, ease of use, and integration capabilities with existing systems.

Integration Issues: Integrating e-commerce solutions with other business systems, such as CRM, ERP, and inventory management, can pose challenges and require technical expertise.

Operational Adjustments: Transitioning to e-commerce may necessitate changes in operational processes, including inventory management, order fulfillment, and customer service. SMEs must adapt their operations to effectively support online sales.

C. Cybersecurity and Data Protection Concerns

Security Risks: E-commerce platforms are vulnerable to cybersecurity threats such as hacking, phishing, and malware. Protecting sensitive customer data and preventing data breaches is critical for maintaining trust and compliance.

Regulatory Compliance: SMEs must comply with data protection regulations, such as GDPR or CCPA, which govern how customer data is collected, stored, and used. Ensuring compliance requires implementing appropriate security measures and policies.

Data Protection Measures: Implementing robust cybersecurity practices, such as encryption, secure payment gateways, and regular security audits, is essential to safeguarding data and protecting against cyber threats.

D. Training and Skill Development Needs

Employee Training: Staff members need training to effectively use e-commerce platforms, manage online orders, and handle customer inquiries. Adequate training ensures that employees can operate the system efficiently and provide high-quality customer support.

Skill Development: SMEs may require additional skills in digital marketing, data analysis, and technical support to fully leverage e-commerce tools and strategies. Investing in skill development can enhance the effectiveness of e-commerce operations.

Continuous Learning: The rapidly evolving nature of e-commerce technology and trends necessitates ongoing learning and adaptation. SMEs must stay updated with the latest developments to remain competitive and optimize their e-commerce strategies.

Addressing these challenges and considerations is crucial for SMEs to successfully implement and benefit from e-commerce adoption. By carefully managing costs, overcoming technical hurdles, ensuring data protection, and investing in training, SMEs can maximize the advantages of digital commerce and achieve long-term success.

Strategies for Successful E-Commerce Adoption

A. Planning and Strategy Development

Define Objectives: Clearly outline the goals for adopting e-commerce, such as increasing sales, expanding market reach, or improving customer service. Setting specific, measurable objectives helps guide the implementation process.

Conduct Market Research: Analyze industry trends, customer preferences, and competitor strategies to inform e-commerce decisions. Understanding the market landscape helps tailor the approach to meet customer needs effectively.

Develop a Business Plan: Create a comprehensive plan that includes budget estimates, timelines, and resource allocation. This plan should address initial setup costs, ongoing expenses, and expected ROI to ensure a structured approach to e-commerce adoption.

Set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs): Establish KPIs to measure the success of e-commerce initiatives, such as sales growth, customer acquisition rates, and website traffic. Regularly review these metrics to assess performance and make data-driven adjustments.

B. Choosing the Right Platform and Technology

Evaluate Platform Options: Assess various e-commerce platforms based on factors such as ease of use, scalability, features, and integration capabilities. Consider platforms like Shopify, WooCommerce, or custom-built solutions based on business needs.

Prioritize Security and Compliance: Select platforms that offer robust security features, such as encryption and secure payment processing, to protect customer data and ensure regulatory compliance.

Ensure Scalability: Choose technology that can grow with the business, accommodating increasing traffic, expanding product lines, and evolving customer demands.

Integration Capabilities: Ensure that the chosen platform integrates seamlessly with existing systems (e.g., CRM, ERP) and supports necessary functionalities such as inventory management and order processing.

C. Marketing and Customer Acquisition Strategies

Digital Marketing: Implement digital marketing strategies to drive traffic and attract customers. This includes search engine optimization (SEO), pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, email marketing, and social media campaigns.

Content Creation: Develop engaging content, such as blog posts, videos, and product descriptions, to attract and retain customers. High-quality content enhances brand visibility and provides value to potential buyers.

Customer Engagement: Utilize tools like chatbots, personalized recommendations, and loyalty programs to enhance customer interactions and foster long-term relationships.

Performance Tracking: Monitor the effectiveness of marketing efforts using analytics tools. Adjust strategies based on performance data to optimize customer acquisition and retention.

D. Continuous Improvement and Adaptation

Regular Monitoring: Continuously track e-commerce performance using KPIs and analytics. Identify areas for improvement and address any issues promptly to maintain optimal performance.

Stay Updated: Keep up with the latest e-commerce trends, technologies, and best practices. Adapting to new developments helps ensure that the business remains competitive and relevant in the digital landscape.

Solicit Feedback: Gather feedback from customers regarding their online shopping experience. Use this feedback to make improvements and enhance the user experience.

Iterate and Optimize: Regularly review and refine e-commerce strategies, processes, and technologies. Implementing incremental changes based on data and feedback helps drive continuous improvement and sustained growth.

By following these strategies, SMEs can effectively navigate the e-commerce landscape, maximize the benefits of digital commerce, and achieve long-term success in the online marketplace. (Hope et al., 2001)

Conclusion

A. Summary of Key Findings

This assessment highlights that e-commerce adoption offers substantial economic benefits for SMEs, including increased revenue, cost reduction, improved efficiency, competitive advantage, and access to global markets. Key findings indicate that SMEs can significantly enhance their market reach and customer base through digital platforms, which also enable them to reduce overhead costs and streamline operations. However, challenges such as initial investment, technical difficulties, cybersecurity concerns, and the need for training must be addressed for successful e-commerce implementation.

B. Implications for SMEs

The adoption of e-commerce presents transformative opportunities for SMEs to grow and compete in the digital economy. Embracing e-commerce can lead to higher revenue, operational efficiencies, and expanded market access. SMEs that effectively leverage e-commerce tools and strategies can achieve significant competitive advantages, while those that fail to adapt may struggle to keep pace with evolving market demands and competitor innovations.

C. Future Outlook for E-Commerce in the SME Sector

The future of e-commerce in the SME sector looks promising, with continued advancements in technology and shifting consumer preferences driving further growth. Emerging trends such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and mobile commerce are expected to enhance the e-commerce experience and offer new opportunities for SMEs. Additionally, the increasing emphasis on sustainability and personalized shopping experiences will likely influence future e-commerce strategies. SMEs that remain agile and embrace these trends will be well-positioned to thrive in the evolving digital landscape. Ifinedo (2011)

D. Recommendations for SMEs Considering Adoption

Develop a Strategic Plan: SMEs should create a detailed e-commerce strategy that outlines goals, budgets, and timelines. This plan should address potential challenges and include a roadmap for implementation.

Choose the Right Platform: Carefully evaluate e-commerce platforms and technologies to select those that align with business needs, offer scalability, and provide robust security features.

Invest in Marketing: Implement effective digital marketing strategies to drive traffic, attract customers, and build brand awareness. Utilize analytics to measure performance and refine marketing efforts.

Focus on Customer Experience: Enhance the online shopping experience through user-friendly design, personalized recommendations, and responsive customer service.

Address Cybersecurity: Prioritize data protection by adopting strong cybersecurity measures and ensuring compliance with relevant regulations.

Provide Training: Invest in training for employees to effectively manage e-commerce operations and stay updated with industry best practices.

Monitor and Adapt: Continuously monitor e-commerce performance, gather customer feedback, and stay informed about emerging trends. Be prepared to adapt strategies and technologies to maintain competitiveness.

By following these recommendations, SMEs can effectively navigate the e-commerce landscape, maximize the benefits of digital commerce, and position themselves for long-term success in the online marketplace. Dwivedi et al. (2021)

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