

## **E-commerce in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

In the era of globalization and science & technology, E-commerce has gained considerable significance. In the post-Covid-19 period, the importance of E-commerce has further augmented. States leave no stone unturned to capitalize on the potential of E-commerce. Pakistan, currently, is the 37th largest E-commerce market worldwide, with market revenues successively increasing over the past 3 years. The industry has potential as the number of internet users is enhancing by leaps and bounds which will in turn manifest innovation and improve E-commerce business. Pakistan can learn from leading economies by improving its supply chain management system through logistics and distribution networks. Many companies are incorporating their products in the digital sphere, Vans and Coca-Cola. The gaming industry has untapped potential in Pakistan. The latter is producing major corporations such as Walmart and Amazon basics which highlights its capacity. Meanwhile, challenges faced by the E-commerce industry in Pakistan range from, a lack of trust by consumers whether in the product or payment method, to a reliable payment mechanism for instant transactions such as PayPal, and cash on the delivery payment method which slows economic activity. More importantly, the absence of an efficient logistics network hinders economic activity altogether. This paper, thus, will comprehensively analyze the potential of E-commerce and will shed light on the prospects and challenges faced by the emerging economy and will give policy recommendations to modernize the E-commerce market.

**Key Words:** Walmart, Amazon, B2B, Globalization, Internet, Companies, Young Bulge

## **Introduction**

The world in the current arena has been heading towards Artificial Intelligence AI, knowledge economy and E-commerce. States are pondering over capitalizing on the potential of E-commerce and diversifying economies to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. E-commerce also known as electronic commerce is a distinctive modus operandi of the purchasing and selling of goods on the internet. The mechanisms of it include a different kind of data, having tools and systems for purchasers and sellers encompassing online payment encryption and shopping. Online stores and platforms are prerequisites for carrying out sales activities. EMarketer in 2022 maintained that global retail marketing E-commerce sales first time in mankind's history were supposed to surpass 5 trillion dollars and were expected to rise to 7 trillion dollars by 2025. (Big Commerce, 2021)

One of the most distinctive aspects of the E-commerce which is widely acknowledged worldwide is that it does not require hiring buildings and hiring people to protect buildings. Rather individuals are empowered to shop online on a global scale while staying home. The market potential can be augmented by the sellers to attract new customers. There is the likelihood of initiating new channels for online business. E-commerce makes life fairly easy for buyers and can buy items anywhere and anytime by avoiding the geographical location and rush of the bazaar. Consequently, consumers are becoming more connected, tech-savvy and engaged with E-commerce which invariably strengthens the economic growth of the country. The growing concentration on customer experience, by and large, has heralded the path to demands and regulations in greater accessibility online and customers' obsession is being increased with online shopping, visiting website online stores frequently. (Miva, 2021)

E-commerce, arguably, is environmentally friendly, reducing its carbon footprint. At the current juncture, climate change is one of the biggest challenges mankind is confronting. However, E-

commerce is exceedingly instrumental for the environment nor does it require, buildings, transport, manufacturing, product packing and warehouses. It is an innovative component in boosting the economy, augmenting productivity, stimulating innovation, driving better shopping experiences, creating innumerable opportunities and also preserving the planet from environmental hazards. The more E-commerce grows, the more economic growth of the country will flourish and the more people will obtain economic and environmental dividends (Miva, 2021)

An E-commerce business can be extended to national and international markets respectively with lower capital investment. Obstacles of massive capital investment can be avoided by organizations in setting up their business with lower capital. Once the disenfranchised rural population is mainstreamed in society they will produce enormously for the urban dwellers. There is no pause in E-commerce can be carried out 24/7 shopping convenience. World's nearly a quarter of shopping currently is being done online. China alone is believed to have been having 440Mn online consumers. The US, in terms of country-wise sales, is stealing a march on other countries with almost \$ 9Tn in sales, 3 times higher than Japan and 4 times higher than China. (UNCTAD, 2017)

### **Global Trends in E-commerce**

The US is viewed as one of the largest and most developed online shopping markets in E-commerce having \$1 trillion in annual retail sales. The US top companies like Amazon, eBay, and brick-and-mortar retailers such as Home Depot have been contributing unprecedentedly to its economic growth. E-commerce in the post-Covid-19 period has experienced rapid growth. Amazon founded in 1994 is considered a leader in the retail segment in the world. It first launched an online bookstore, accordingly, diversified range of products encompassing food, electronics, jewellery, apparel, furniture and toy (Werner Geyser, 2021)

China a rising power that has the world's largest number of internet users is making a headway exponentially in E-commerce. Giant Meituan in China's E-commerce has represented nearly three million deliveries of online food markets to six hundred million customers contributing 65 billion dollars to China's economy annually. Amid Covid-19, the number of customers of Meituan via the mobile app has further increased featuring nearly 5.8 million merchants in 2,800 Chinese cities, resulting in a 400 percent enhancement in demand for online groceries. The supportive government policies of China and the creativity of its entrepreneurs have played a crucial role in the progress of E-commerce. The Chinese E-commerce sector was once considered a collection of copycats, presently, is producing globally-used apps.

China in 2003 had 79.5 million internet users nearly six percent of its population when Alibaba and JD.com launched their platforms has now grown to 904 million (64.5 percent of the population) due to the pandemic proving more instrumental in cementing E-commerce in the country. China has initiated a "new infrastructure" aimed at improving digital services like 5G networks encompassing data centres and the Internet of Things enormously augmenting the E-commerce advancement. Last year, Alibaba allowed US companies to sell through its platforms within a year Alibaba transition's numbers involving the US businesses accelerated to 100 percent and the number of US buyers grew to 76 percent (Cheng Li and Ryan McElveen, 2020)

Japan remains the third largest market in E-commerce contributing nearly a revenue of 188 billion dollars in 2021. Tokyo's E-commerce in 2021 experienced an increase of 32% contributing 18 percent to the worldwide growth rate. In the coming year E-commerce will further thrive due to burgeoning markets of the world. Amazon.co.jp. is the biggest E-commerce market. (Commerce DB, 2021). According to Global Data, Japan's E-commerce market was predicted to grow (\$194.3 billion) in 2022 since the tendency of consumers shifted increasingly from offline to online. Global data

further stated that Japan was the fourth leading E-commerce market of the world while “China is the top market with total sales of \$2.1 trillion, followed by the US with \$1.5 trillion, and the UK with \$292.1 billion” (Global Data, 2022)

India the second largest population after China has also been making steady progress in E-commerce. The Indian E-commerce industry in 2018 earned 22 billion dollars, and the number is estimated to grow up to 350 billion dollars by 2030. Due to the burgeoning population, there has been fierce competition in the E-commerce business in India. Local and foreign companies are trying to maximize their market shares. Amazon 2017 in India was the leading online marketplace has more than 500 million dollars in sales. Myntra and Flipkart companies contributed tremendously to E-commerce. In 2018, E-commerce sales average revenue per user in India remained at approximately 50 dollars and was estimated to reach 75 dollars by 2024. (Statista, 2023)

In recent years, internet users and smartphone penetration have witnessed a thriving in India. Internet users have accelerated unprecedentedly. Internet users in India driven by the 'Digital India' programme reached 830 million in 2020. Usage of the smartphone is increasing rapidly by 2030 its utilization will reach 1 billion users resulting in the consolidation Indian digital sector and will contribute 1 trillion dollars by 2030. Against this backdrop, Indian E-commerce is seeing remarkable progress ranging from direct-to-consumer (D2C) business-to-business (B2B) consumer-to-business (C2B) and, consumer-to-consumer (C2C). In recent years, B2B and D2C saw enormous growth. The D2C market of India by FY 27 is likely to reach 60 billion dollars. More considerably, Indian E-commerce is going to grow up to 350 billion dollars by 2030 (Indian Brand Equality Foundation, 2022)

### **E-commerce in Pakistan**

Pakistan is fully cognizant of the value of E-commerce, thus, has been trying to capitalize on its potential in a bid to obtain maximum economic dividends. E-commerce is also essential in the diversification of the economy. As a result, its activities have been gaining considerable importance. The increasing internet penetration, the lower transaction costs and the convenient ways, by and large, are attributed to accelerating the E-commerce business in the country. Consumers and enterprises have given a great deal of concentration to online trading. The major cities of Pakistan like Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Faisalabad, and Rawalpindi are seeing E-commerce thriving. Punjab the largest province in Pakistan population wise generates 55 percent of online orders. Karachi the largest city in Pakistan creates 24 percent of online orders. E-commerce, surprisingly, is lower in major cities of the country and in rural areas of the country are negligible. (Karandaaz, 2017)

E-commerce in 2021 contributed USD 5.9 billion to the economy of Pakistan and the latter was ranked as the 37th largest market for e-commerce placing it ahead, of South Africa and Iran and behind Israel. Pakistan's E-commerce with an increase of 45% contributed 15 percent to the worldwide growth rate in 2021. (Fauzan Shah, 2021) A German company specializing in market and consumer data stated that the E-commerce market of Pakistan was estimated to create US\$7.666 billion in revenue in 2022. The date further maintained that with an annual growth rate of nearly 6.09 percent between 2022 and 2025 the country's E-commerce was projected to generate a market volume of US\$ 9.1 billion by 2025. It is pertinent to mention here that the E-commerce market is dominated by business-to-consumer (B2C) in Pakistan. Meanwhile, other main sectors groceries/quick (q)-commerce, general e-commerce and fashion are also mushrooming at a rapid speed. (Itrat Bashir, 2022)

According to the State Bank of Pakistan SBP, the country has the potential to accelerate its GDP by 36 billion dollars and can create 4 million jobs by 2025 by increasing the use of digital financial

services alone. Pakistan has 5,000 IT companies and call centers followed by 300,000 English-speaking expert IT professionals, 20,000 IT graduates and engineers and 13 software technology parks. E-commerce, perhaps, has great potential in Pakistan expansion of it will buttress the national economic growth. Since the 1990s the massive investment in Information and Communications Technology ICT infrastructure has developed a robust ICT sector creating a conducive environment for Information Technology IT, liberalizing the telecommunication sector cultivating an information society and enabling the services industry. Pakistan has a 60 percent young population becoming more than 200 million is presenting a huge human and knowledge capital. (Sarfaraz A. Khan, 2018)

According to the SBP report, registered E-commerce merchants have grown up to by 2.6 times and E-commerce payments have risen to 2.3 times in a year. It is mushrooming slowly and gradually. The business community in the country is becoming accustomed to E-commerce. Retailers ranging from electronic equipment stores to clothing outlets are using different websites to sell their goods. Items are easily available to customers after the emergence of online marketplaces OLX Pakistan and Daraz. pk. Online business has consequently been propping up and contributing momentarily to the economic growth of Pakistan. As far as SBP's Payment Systems Review (Q2FY18) was concerned more than 344 E-commerce merchants in the country were registered by 2016 and expected to reach 905 by 2017. The cash-on-delivery COD system is being excessively used among consumers to buy goods online in Pakistan. More than 84 percent of online sales are believed to have been carried out through COD. (Sarfaraz A. Khan, 2018)

The growing progress of Daraz.pk illustrates that E-commerce is flourishing rapidly in the country it alone 2022 will create one million direct and indirect jobs. World Bank report maintains that E-commerce is essential for economic growth and the creation of jobs, particularly in developing

counties is a remarkable development. E-commerce, within three months, has generated 1,000 jobs in three months opening new avenues for women's participation in the national economy. (Daily Sabah, 2020)

ICT infrastructure is expected to be developed creating IT valleys and server farms and providing internet services. The tangible example is Alibaba which so far has generated 30 million job opportunities and remained more successful for the youth and rural communities. Digital Pakistan Policy has accentuated national E-commerce by modernizing internet merchant accounts. The policy is also aimed at promoting E-banking facilities that will flourish internet merchant accounts. E-commerce will also promote digitization by introducing slabs with an effort to discourage Cash on Delivery. One of the surveys conducted by Saleem et al argues that the age group of 20 is more fascinated by online. Pakistan nearly has 71 million broadband subscribers and more than 69 million 3G/4G subscribers making the country one of the top untapped markets as far as the E-commerce business is concerned. Many youths have been stimulated by E-commerce and are constantly engaged in business as well as prompting innovative ideas. (Asif Javid, 2019)

In his book entitled "Passive Income" Azhar articulated that Pakistan had multiple opportunities for the enhancement of economic growth via skill development associated with E-commerce. He also met Arif Alvi, the President of Pakistan and the president assured him that his efforts would not go in vain and the government would get maximum advantages from his book to promote E-commerce business in the country. (Durdana Najam, 2021)

Zain Ahmed who is engaged with the E-commerce giant of Pakistan maintained that E-commerce business in the post-Covid-19-period had been at a stage of hyper-growth and the pandemic turned out to be a blessing by accelerating online business. The pandemic impelled customers to go for digital purchases, the offline buying decreased on account of lockdowns. Zain Ahmed further



reiterated that Pakistan was blessed with an E-commerce market that was supposed to be explored and there had been positive indicators of the luminous future of the untapped market. "Right now, the e-commerce market of Pakistan is ideal for the world and this is why we see a lot of large venture capital investing in local startups," he said" They have finally realized the potential of the country." (Omar Qureshi, 2022)

In 2018, the UNCTAD B2C e-Commerce Index, ranked Pakistan 117 out of 151 countries on E-commerce having a value of 32.34 on the E-commerce readiness index. There has been considerable improvement in several online vendors such as online payment facilities and local E-commerce platforms initiated by banks including cellular service providers. The continued efforts of the government to the improvement of internet accessibility and financial inclusion in most parts of the country embarked on a path to the E-commerce business. PTA's data unveils that, "as of July 2019, there were 161 million cellular subscribers, 70 million 3G/4G subscribers and 72 million broadband subscribers and total tele density of 76.56%". As mentioned earlier Pakistan is bestowed with a young population that compared to the old generation is more open to embracing technology promoting E-commerce that invariably will provide job opportunities to more than 130 million in the next 30 years. (State of Economy, Annual Report 2017-18)

Over the last two years, the landscape of E-commerce has exponentially altered in Pakistan costumers ordered online by purchasing sanitizers, masks, diapers and baby food life-saving medicines. This is a radical societal change the society has been utilizing. Pakistan is pondering over the success of the developed states in their progress in E-commerce and their modal is extremely likely to be implemented in the country so that people of the country could become more advanced in this regard (Ali Abbas, 2021)

### **Challenges to E-commerce in Pakistan**

Pakistan in the foreseeable future is prone to cyberspace attacks. The country in January 2021 has confronted with one million cyberattacks. If data safety is not provided to freelancers and businessmen, the future of E-commerce would remain in jeopardy. Surprisingly, so far no pragmatic measures have been taken by policymakers to thwart the cyberspace attacks. Due to bureaucratic hurdles, there have been many challenges in the implementation of the National Cyber Security Policy 2021. On the other hand, the country lags far behind in skilled workforce resulting in hampering the growth of E-commerce companies and expanding their business. Educational institutions require special attention by promoting research-oriented culture with an effort to produce productive and skillful minds that, by and large, will play an instrumental role in the consolidation of the business.

The E-commerce sector lacks big players and is dominated by a few companies having their monopoly. On the contrary, the market requires a competitive environment. The more there is competition, the more prosperous the will be E-commerce market. Pakistan has been witnessing a low market share of the E-commerce market constituting merely 2 percent of its retail market. Instead of relying on traditional markets, an overhaul is needed to promote digital literacy. At the current juncture, nearly 88 percent of Pakistani have access to internet and broadband services. However, the utilization of E-commerce continues to remain low causing a decline in economic growth (Mian Ahmad Naeem Salik, 2022)

PayPal is the world's preferred digital payment is an exceedingly crucial component in E-commerce, allowing exporters to receive money with ease. Charges of PayPal as transaction fee are merely 2.5%

offering an easy dispute mechanism. Surprisingly, PayPal is unavailable in Pakistan on account of various reasons. The country will have to provide the availability of PayPal with an objective to accelerate business. Pakistan is fertile land for freelancing it has been ranked 4th in the world in freelancing. The former's activities are an essential part of E-commerce in which they use freelancers and fiver. Freelancers confront innumerable challenges in cross-border payment in this process, they are being charged 5% and 30% by Skrill and Payoneer. By giving access to PayPal the freelancer could easily negotiate with their customers to remit accounts through this platform with minimal charges.

Asad Umar, a former finance minister, in this regard, articulated that Pakistan would launch PayPal's services or would replicate China's modal of Alipay. Needless to say, so far his dream is not materialized which is causing damage to the E-commerce market. The form of official documentation requiring form R by the SBP is yet another challenge faced by freelancers. They term the form R as an unnecessary time-wasting activity. (Karachi Chamber of Commerce & Industry, 2019)

Pakistan also lacks global portals for the promotion of E-commerce business. B2B and B2C such as Amazon and eBay are vital global portals which sadly do not exist in Pakistan. Islamabad requires entrepreneurial spirit to invest hugely to launch such an important portal. Against this backdrop, China is at the top of the world in B2B marketing agencies followed by the US and India. Had there been a portal of the stature of Amazon in Pakistan, it could have extensive benefits across a business like those of Vietnam which currently has nearly 700,000 businesses of which 98% are SMEs. Though in Pakistan most businesses have SMEs and are unable to capture large markets. The ineffective utilization of financial inclusion also creates troubles in E-commerce businesses.

Providing low-income segments at a discounted rate under the financial services to those unbanked populations living in rural areas to reap the benefit of the digital revolution will yield positive outcomes. Imposition of heavy taxes on cab aggregators like Bykea, Uber and Careem is a futile exercise. Such a step, arguably, will discourage consumers to get maximum economic dividends from E-commerce. They will shift their focus to a traditional business where there is no growth (Karachi Chamber of Commerce & Industry, 2019)

It is a matter of grave concern, Pakistan in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is a century of science & technology, knowledge economy and research & development have the lowest literacy rate in the region having merely 62 percent literacy rate. The country also lags far behind in research & development which is a key component of the knowledge economy and promotion of E-commerce. Unfortunately, after 75 years of independence, almost four in 10 Pakistanis remain illiterate, consigned to a life of hardship and poverty. Ironically, the literacy rate is not improving causing damage to the economy in general and E-commerce in particular. As a result, the Information Technology IT sector of Pakistan faces stagnation. To compare Pakistan's IT production with India the latter's IT exports are mere \$3bn while the former has \$150bn. With a negligible literacy rate and poor progress in the IT sector Pakistan cannot make headways, it is simply out of the question (Miftah Ismail, 2022)

### **Recommendations**

- Pakistan will have to improve fast internet services for the promotion of E-commerce.
- There ought to be capacity building and training for businessmen and freelancers.
- The majority of people still do not know the real potential of E-commerce public and private awareness of changing globally in E-commerce should be promoted.

- Improving cross-border E-commerce is a prerequisite to increasing export.
- Gross domestic product on E-commerce for job creation should be enhanced.
- Chinese modal of Rural E-commerce Demonstration Program aimed at reducing poverty be promoted in the country.
- By adopting cross-border E-commerce, Pakistan's tourism sector can benefit massively. Worldwide tourism sites be promoted with an effort to cement the e-commerce business.
- Consolidating its unique selling points to brand itself to global and regional markets is a prerequisite for Pakistan.
- Pakistan should not miss the bus of carving out a bigger slice of E-commerce under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC.
- In order to expand its business via E-commerce, Pakistan ought to modernize its policies keeping in view the demands of multinational E-commerce companies.
- Transparency should not be compromised in industries and top priority be given to SMS and local manufacturers
- It is the need of the hour to establish a centralized portal for E-commerce and exports ought to be incentivized.
- Pakistan lacks consistency in policy and the policy of the previous government should be maintained.
- Companies mostly remain uncertain of the political and economic situations of Pakistan. Improving political and economic stability is instrumental to the thriving of E-commerce.
- Businessmen remain suspicious of the data. To protect data government needs to establish data protection in a bid to win their confidence of them.

- The government on an urgent basis should improve digital literacy, particularly in semi-urban areas of the country.
- With the low investment-to-GDP ratio of 15 percent that has further gone down to 13 percent. Pakistan, thus, will have to invest a whopping amount in technological change infrastructure and logistics support.
- In the prevailing era of science & technology and innovation labour force of Pakistan need to be educated and healthy and should have easy access to the internet, particularly in rural areas.
- To raise awareness among manufacturers about E-commerce and engaging Pakistani embassies to obtain private equality firms will yield positive outcomes.
- Pakistan has constantly been under cyberspace attacks. Overlooking cyberspace attacks will cause irreparable damage.
- Competition lacks in markets, there is a monopoly of a few companies dominating the markets. Competitive and healthy competition is mandatory for a business to flourish.
- The curriculum must be updated by including E-commerce, sales, marketing and advertising.
- Equipping citizens with skills needs to be improved keeping in view the competition in the global market.

## **Conclusion**

Countries in the prevailing international politics leave no stone unturned to diversify their economies. Against this backdrop, E-commerce is a useful and effective tool in the diversification of the economy. Covid-19 appears to have been a blessing in disguise as far as the E-commerce is concerned. The world underwent a radical change amid the pandemic and post-Covid-19 period. Lockdowns due to the pandemic forced customers to buy online, consequently, boomed E-

commerce. The developed countries obtained maximum economic dividends from E-commerce while developing countries are trying to espouse their trajectory to improve their economies. Pakistan is a burgeoning market of E-commerce, and it has the potential to make headways in the near future.

According to the State Bank of Pakistan SBP, the country has the potential to accelerate its GDP by \$36Bn and create 4 million jobs by 2025 by increasing the use of digital financial services alone. E-commerce in 2021 contributed USD 5.9 billion to the economy of Pakistan and the latter was ranked the 37th largest market for e-commerce placing it ahead, of South Africa and Iran and behind Israel. Pakistan's E-commerce with an increase of 45% contributed 15 percent to the worldwide growth rate in 2021. Above all, A German Company specializing in market and consumer data stated that the E-commerce market of Pakistan was estimated to create US\$7.666 billion in revenue in 2022.

Meanwhile, there are innumerable challenges in the promotion of e-commerce. Pakistan in the foreseeable future is prone to cyberspace attacks. The country in January 2021 has confronted with one million cyberattacks. If data safety is not provided to businessmen and freelancers, the future of E-commerce would be in jeopardy. Due to bureaucratic hurdles, there have been many challenges in the implementation of the National Cyber Security Policy 2021. On the other hand, the country lags far behind in skilled workforce resulting in hampering the growth of E-commerce companies and expanding their business. Educational institutions require special attention by promoting research-oriented culture to produce productive and skillful minds that will play an instrumental role in the consolidation of e-commerce.

The E-commerce sector lacks big players and is dominated by a few companies having their monopoly. On the contrary, the market requires a competitive environment. Pakistan has been

witnessing a low market share of E-commerce constituting merely 2 percent of its retail market. PayPal is the world's preferred digital payment is an exceedingly crucial component in allowing exporters to receive money with ease. Charges of PayPal as transaction fee are merely 2.5% offering an easy dispute mechanism. Surprisingly, PayPal is unavailable in Pakistan on account of various reasons. Pakistan also lacks global portals for the promotion of E-commerce business. B2B and B2C such as Amazon and eBay are the essential global portals which sadly do not exist in Pakistan.

The country's progress in research & development is dissatisfactory which is a key component of the knowledge economy and promotion of E-commerce. Unfortunately, 75 years after independence, almost four in 10 Pakistanis remain illiterate, consigned to a life of hardship and poverty.

On the other hand, the country is bearing the brunt of exacerbating economy and foreign exchange reserves are declining by leaps and bounds. The country with 31 billion dollars and imports of 81 billion dollars in the era of globalization and regional connectivity is unlikely to survive. Climate change further intensifies the economic woes of the country. The agriculture sector is believed to have been contributing 23 percent to the GDP of the country, creating nearly 45 percent of jobs but it is the most vulnerable sector to the floods caused by climate change. Since 1947, 28 times floods occurred in the country. Floods of 2022 caused 30 billion dollars in economic losses to Pakistan and more than 30 million were affected. Pakistan, thus, cannot rely primarily on agriculture, diversification of the economic requires a reassessment.

E-commerce is one of the crucial addition to the diversification of the economy. There is a great deal of potential in Pakistan in the promotion of it. The country has 65 percent young population who are obsessed with the internet, science & technology and E-commerce. In short, Pakistan needs to make extra efforts in making further headways in E-commerce in the bid to improve the tattered economy. Without a robust economy, state sovereignty will remain compromised.



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