

E-commerce and market research as fundamental tools for Ecuadorian business expansion in the digital era

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Comercio electrónico y estudio de mercado como herramientas fundamentales para la expansión empresarial ecuatoriana en la era digital

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ABSTRACT

This review article addressed the critical necessity for Ecuadorian businesses to integrate electronic commerce (e-commerce) and market research to ensure their expansion in the digital era. The study aimed to analyze the fundamental importance of these strategies as indispensable tools for business growth and brand positioning. A bibliographic review methodology was employed, restricting the search to research published after 2019 in specialized databases such as Scopus and Web of Science. The critical analysis focused on the evolution of e-commerce, tracing its origins from Electronic Funds Transfers (EFT) in the 70s to its modern B2C and B2B models, and the evaluation of key strategic tools, including the PETSA Macroenvironmental Analysis and Porter's Five Forces. E-commerce, defined as an electronic commercial transaction, was determined to be crucial for increasing productivity and profits. However, it was identified that the lack of an online store hindered the collection of vital customer data (habits, preferences), a deficiency that, alongside the absence of proper market research, was confirmed as the main cause of business failure. Despite Ecuador reporting 75,6 % active internet users, the review concluded that sustained business growth intrinsically depended on the rigorous application of e-commerce theoretical foundations and market intelligence to achieve differentiation and brand positioning in a highly competitive environment.

Keywords: Electronic Commerce; Market Research; Business Growth; Brand Positioning; Competitiveness; Digital Era.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo de revisión abordó la necesidad crítica de que las empresas ecuatorianas integraran el comercio electrónico (*e-commerce*) y el estudio de mercado para garantizar su expansión en la era digital. El estudio se propuso analizar la importancia fundamental de estas estrategias como herramientas indispensables para el crecimiento y el posicionamiento de marca. Se empleó una metodología de revisión bibliográfica, limitando la búsqueda a investigaciones posteriores a 2019 en bases de datos especializadas como Scopus y Web of Science. El análisis crítico se centró en la evolución del *e-commerce* (desde las Transferencias Electrónicas de Fondos o EFT de los 70 hasta sus modelos B2C y B2B) y la evaluación de herramientas estratégicas clave, incluyendo el Análisis Macroambiental PETSA y las Cinco Fuerzas de Porter. Se determinó que el *e-commerce*, definido como una transacción comercial electrónica, es crucial para aumentar la productividad y las ganancias. Sin embargo, se identificó que la falta de una tienda online obstaculizó la recopilación de datos vitales de los clientes (hábitos, preferencias), una deficiencia que, junto con la ausencia de estudio de mercado, se confirmó como la causa principal del fracaso empresarial. A pesar de que Ecuador reportó un 75,6 % de usuarios activos de internet, la revisión concluyó que el crecimiento sostenido empresarial dependió intrínsecamente de la aplicación rigurosa de las bases teóricas del *e-commerce* y la inteligencia de mercado para lograr la diferenciación y el posicionamiento de marca en un entorno de alta rivalidad competitiva.

Palabras clave: Comercio Electrónico; Estudio de Mercado; Crecimiento Empresarial; Posicionamiento de Marca; Competitividad; Era Digital

INTRODUCTION

The immersion in the digital age has transformed the business landscape, making an internet presence crucial for the survival of any business or company. This digital transformation, accelerated by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has forced industries to undergo adaptation processes. Businesses that did not adapt to the digital world, social media, or online stores faced the risk of bankruptcy. The current business model focuses on platforms that connect consumers and producers for the exchange of goods, services, and information, with these platforms being the “factories of the social media era.”

Definition and Evolution of E-commerce

E-commerce is defined as any form of commercial transaction in which a supplier offers goods or services to a customer in exchange for payment, and where both parties interact electronically rather than through direct physical exchange or contact.⁽¹⁾ This process of buying and selling online has become an essential complement for MSMEs, as it increases their productivity and profits.⁽²⁾

The origins of e-commerce date back to the 1970s with the introduction of Electronic Funds Transfers between banks, seeking to make better use of technological resources and optimize electronic payments through private and secure networks. Subsequently, services such as Point of Sale (POS) terminals in stores and payroll payments to employees by check were included. However, the main impetus came in the 1990s with the popularization of internet access for the general population, which drastically reduced the time and cost of exchanging and processing information, as well as the time spent searching and comparing prices.

Global and Regional Impact of E-commerce

Globally, e-commerce is a dominant business strategy. Nearly 90 % of the world's population admitted to having made online purchases in 2020, generating online sales revenue of US\$4,2 trillion.⁽⁴⁾ Latin America has shown biannual growth of 98,8 %, with Brazil leading 60 % of commercial activity.⁽⁵⁾

Ecuador has experienced significant growth. Online purchases have moved 75 billion, representing 2 % of total regional transactions. In 2022, 62 % of the Ecuadorian population were active internet users. Out of a total population of approximately 18 million, around 13,6 million people (75,6 %) are active internet users, an average higher than the global average. Projections indicate that e-commerce revenue will continue to grow annually between 16 % and 17 % until 2025, potentially exceeding \$6,1 billion.⁽⁶⁾ In 2024, the population is estimated at 17,9 million.⁽⁷⁾

In terms of consumption, millennials represent 56 % of Ecuadorians in full-time employment and are the most willing to spend online or use mobile apps to pay. E-commerce accounts for 3 % of mass consumption purchases.⁽⁸⁾ Women buy up to 8 % more in fashion and accessories, while men purchase 10 % more in technology items. Clothing has historically been the best-selling item on digital portals.⁽⁹⁾ Although Ecuador generated \$200 million in online sales (according to 2020 figures), the pandemic made it clear that modernization was inevitable.⁽¹⁰⁾

Market research as a fundamental strategic tool

While e-commerce provides the channel, its success requires a deep understanding of the consumer and the competitive

environment, a task that falls to market research. Market research is defined as an exploration carried out by all companies to determine whether economic activity is sustainable over time or not. This exploration is essential because it provides companies with all possible information on consumption in a given niche. In essence, market research serves to inform companies about the behavior of markets of interest, i.e., their consumers, so that they can define their strategy.⁽¹¹⁾

To achieve this objective, there are several types of market research. In the context of this review, quantitative research, using surveys, is a crucial method for collecting data and finding patterns and trends in customer purchasing behavior.⁽¹²⁾ The application of this analysis is vital, as it allows companies to establish their value proposition and market positioning.

Problem Statement

Immersion in the internet is crucial. However, the failure to apply the theoretical foundations of e-commerce and the absence of adequate market research have been the main causes of failure for many businesses. Many entrepreneurs in Ecuador do not invest in a technological model for their businesses, such as the use of electronic payment methods or digital sales systems, which prevents them from surviving in a market that is increasingly linked to technology and process efficiency. If a business does not have a presence on social media or online stores, it is doomed to failure.⁽¹³⁾

This failure to adapt and apply the fundamentals of e-commerce creates serious disadvantages:

1. Difficulty in collecting customer information:

The absence of an online store prevents understanding the needs and preferences of the market, resulting in lost opportunities and low profitability.

2. Excessive competition: High competition, both nationally and internationally, causes customers to opt for other companies, leading to market loss and low profitability.

3. High shipping costs: Logistical problems that result in reduced sales, low competitiveness, and low profitability.

Therefore, the scientific problem that guides this review is: How does the lack of application of the theoretical foundations of e-commerce and adequate market research influence business growth and competitive positioning in the digital age?

Justification of the Study

This review is crucial as it provides a theoretical basis for the marketing field and for entrepreneurs interested in improving their recognition and positioning in the market. It is justified by the fact that online stores allow the collection of vital data (habits, preferences, behaviors) necessary to optimize e-commerce strategies. In addition, a digital presence increases competitiveness by expanding market reach and improving customer interaction.

Analyze the fundamental importance of applying the theoretical foundations of e-commerce and adequate market research as indispensable strategies for business growth, improved competitiveness, and brand positioning in the digital age.

METHOD

This document is structured as a scientific literature review article. Its methodological objective focuses on the collection, analysis, and critical synthesis of concepts, statistical data, and pre-existing theoretical frameworks extracted from academic literature, sector reports, and institutional sources detailed in the references.

The search strategy was based on identifying key studies that support the theoretical foundations of e-commerce, user experience, brand positioning, and market research methodologies. The selection of sources was limited to research from databases such as Scopus, Science Direct, and Web of Science that offered fundamental definitions and recent data (post-2019) applicable to the digital context and, specifically, to the Ecuadorian market.

The critical analysis was carried out by articulating the findings from the sources around the central issue: the need to integrate digital theory and market intelligence for business growth:

1. Conceptual Structuring of E-commerce: The definitions and evolution of e-commerce were contrasted, from its origins in Electronic Funds Transfers (EFT) and its popularization in the 1990s to its current role as a complement that increases productivity and profits for MSMEs. The different business models (B2B, B2C, C2B, C2C) were categorized based on Somalo's descriptions.

2. Evaluation of Strategic Tools: The review delved into two market analysis tools cited in the studies, used to understand the sustainability and attractiveness of the business: PETSA Macroenvironmental Analysis and Microenvironment Analysis (Porter's Five Forces).

The synthesis process focused on identifying the advantages (availability, access to information, personalization) and disadvantages (customer acquisition, logistical capabilities) of e-commerce, demonstrating that the lack of application of theoretical foundations and market research are the main causes of loss of profitability and business failure.

Through the synthesis and critical analysis of these studies, this review seeks to offer a coherent and in-depth narrative that not only describes the current state of knowledge on business digitization, but also identifies gaps and points to future directions for research and professional practice in the Ecuadorian market.

DEVELOPMENT

Business growth in the digital age hinges on two critical dimensions: understanding and implementing e-commerce infrastructure, and applying strategic market analysis.

Theoretical foundations and application of e-commerce

E-commerce is an economic activity based on the supply and demand of products or services through digital media, such as the internet. This mechanism is crucial, as it allows MSMEs to increase their productivity and profits.

Types of e-commerce and their evolution⁽¹⁴⁾

Although the origins of e-commerce date back to Electronic Funds Transfers (EFT) in the 1970s, the popularization of the internet in the 1990s led to a dramatic reduction in costs and information processing times, driving its growth.

Originally, four main types of e-commerce were identified, which have evolved into 15 current modalities. The main modalities that define transactions are:

- B2B (Business to Business): Commercial transaction between two companies operating on the internet, without the involvement of end consumers. This is the wholesale or distributor business model.
- B2C (Business to Consumer): Commercial relationships between businesses and individual customers. It requires a high volume of customers and transactions to generate a sufficient profit margin, usually through many small sales.
- C2B (Consumer to Business): Consumers or independent professionals who offer their products or services to companies.
- C2C (Consumer to Consumer): Transaction between consumers without the involvement of a company. It is more informal in nature, equivalent to second-hand sales or traditional flea markets. This type is common in small towns and cities in Ecuador.

Competitive Advantages of the Digital Environment

E-commerce offers inherent advantages that improve business competitiveness:

1. Availability and Reach: It allows transactions to be carried out from anywhere in the world and at any time, eliminating geographical barriers and facilitating access to a mass market.
2. Access to Information: Digital activity generates an "extremely comprehensive information trail" (tons of data). This information is valuable for understanding customer preferences, which improves competitiveness and increases profitability.
3. Personalization: Digital media facilitates the generation of commercial offers and content that are fully tailored to the customer.
4. Lower Barriers to Entry: Online sales generally require less initial costs and financing compared to a traditional brick-and-mortar business.
5. Social Environment and Dissemination: It allows you to take advantage of platforms such as Facebook or TikTok to achieve dissemination through user profiles, user-generated content (reviews or comments), or convert the website into a virtual reference point.
6. Optimized Logistics: The use of large networks of postal services and global transport companies allows for faster deliveries and increasingly lower costs.

However, companies must manage disadvantages such as the cost of customer acquisition (which requires investment in marketing campaigns to gain visibility) and the need to develop the logistics and service capabilities to fulfill the digital offering, which is a cultural and organizational issue.

Online Stores and User Experience

The successful implementation of e-commerce is based on the quality of the online store, especially the user experience (UX). The role of the UX professional is to make the technology "friendly, satisfying, easy to use, and therefore truly useful."⁽¹⁵⁾ The key points for achieving a good UX are:

- Usability: The store should be easy to use and

understand. A/B testing (testing on groups of people to evaluate reactions) is recommended.

- Design and Responsiveness: This refers to the visual appearance and the organization of information into categories. Responsiveness (adaptability of the design to computers and cell phones) is crucial.
- Accessibility: An attribute that ensures that the product can be used without problems by as many people as possible, including those with functional limitations or disabilities (such as the blind, color blind, or deaf).

Digitization, driven by the pandemic, has forced companies to migrate to platforms such as WooCommerce, Prestashop, Shopify, or Magento. Companies that are not on online stores, or social media run the risk of going bankrupt, while those that have adapted have managed to double their sales. Today, the internet is dominated by platforms that are the current business model, connecting producers and consumers.⁽¹⁷⁾

Brand Positioning and Value⁽¹⁸⁾

To compete in this saturated environment, brand positioning is essential. A brand is the set of ideas and perceptions that are structured in the consumer's mind, acting as a "genetic map." Positioning, according to David A. Aaker,⁽¹⁹⁾ is the part of brand identity and value proposition that is actively communicated to the target audience, demonstrating an advantage over the competition.

Positioning is achieved through a strong brand identity, considered the "soul" of the brand and guided by fundamental beliefs and values. Perspectives on brand identity include:⁽²⁰⁾

- Brand as Product: Focused on perceived quality, defined as the customer's perception of the overall superiority of a product over alternatives.
- Brand as Organization: Linked to the company's culture and values, and focused on innovation and quality. Organizational attributes are more durable and resistant to competition than product attributes.
- Personal Brand: "What they say about you when you're not there."⁽²¹⁾
- Brand as a Symbol: The visual and recognition elements that make it easier for consumers to remember.

The importance of positioning lies in the benefits it provides to the customer:

1. Functional benefits: Functional utility based on product attributes.
2. Emotional benefits: Feelings experienced by the consumer when using the brand.
3. Self-expression benefits: The consumer's projection to others by owning or using the brand.

Market Research and Business Sustainability

Market research is an exploration that allows companies to determine whether their economic activity is sustainable over time. This process provides crucial information about consumption in a given niche and the behavior of markets of interest, which is essential for defining strategy.

Description of the Ecuadorian Market

Ecuador has a growing e-commerce market. The province of Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, for example, is an important

administrative, economic, and commercial center. In 2021, the e-commerce market had 5,5 million users, with a projection of 6,7 million. A survey revealed that 78,9 % of respondents have already made online purchases. The most popular categories in e-commerce include health and medicine, entertainment, food and beverages, technology, and personal and household goods.⁽²²⁾ The most prominent online stores in the country are Mercado Libre, Fybeca, Deprati, and Tiendamia, among others.

Macroenvironment Analysis (PETSA)

PETSA (Political, Economic, Technological, Sociocultural, Environmental) analysis is a simple but vital tool for analyzing macro-environmental changes that influence business, especially in the context of imports in Ecuador.

Political Analysis: Analyzes policy as an instrument of industrial development, aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ecuador uses a tariff scheme to protect domestic industry. The trade balance records the flow of goods (exports and imports), with the evolution of imports depending on domestic demand. The application of safeguards between 2015 and 2017 slowed down the importation of products, decreasing the intensity of trade and reducing consumer choice due to rising prices.⁽²³⁾

Economic Analysis: The pandemic globalized the world and forced entrepreneurs to sell online in a "sink or swim" dynamic. Ecuador's gross domestic product (GDP) grew 1,2 % year-on-year in the first quarter of 2024, a phenomenon attributed mainly to the 3,3 % reduction in imports.⁽²⁴⁾

Technological Analysis: The pandemic triggered business modernization. The adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has had a profound impact on logistics in Ecuador, improving transparency, tracking, and control of the supply chain. Consumers can track their orders in real time, which increases confidence in e-commerce. This competition encourages investment in infrastructure and technology.⁽²⁵⁾

Social Analysis: Technology has changed the way we see the world. Social media and online stores allow people to shop digitally without visiting physical stores. The trade balance maintained a cyclical trend between 2018 and 2022, with the exception of 2021, when imports exceeded exports by 23 %.⁽²⁶⁾

Environmental Analysis: International trade has environmental consequences, such as greenhouse gas emissions. Although the UN established the SDGs, an analysis of 3,779 Ecuadorian companies in 2019 revealed that there is no direct relationship between environmental investment and export levels. This shows a lack of commitment on the part of companies to environmental management and the SDGs through trade flows.⁽²⁷⁾

Microenvironment Analysis (Porter's Five Forces)

Porter's analysis evaluates specific factors within an industry to determine its attractiveness and ability to generate profits.⁽²⁸⁾

Threat of new competitors: The market is less attractive if barriers to entry are low and allow easy entry of new participants with new resources. To mitigate this threat, companies must stand out by focusing on offering added value (such as customer care and service) to build customer loyalty. Experienced companies have competitive advantages, as barriers to entry include high costs and advanced technology.⁽²⁹⁾

Rivalry among existing competitors: Competition is more difficult when competitors are well positioned, numerous,

and fixed costs are high, leading to price wars and aggressive advertising campaigns. Customer loyalty plays an important role. Companies must differentiate themselves; for example, Importadora GV differentiated itself by managing three lines of business (clothing, electronics, and home appliances) and adding unique, high-quality products.

Supplier bargaining power: A segment is not attractive if suppliers are well organized and can impose price or order size conditions, especially if key inputs have no substitutes. Supplier power influences profitability by allowing them to raise prices or reduce quality. The solution is to diversify suppliers.

Customer bargaining power: The market is unattractive when customers are well organized, the product has many substitutes, or the cost is low. Customers can demand lower prices or higher quality, impacting the company. Companies reduce this risk by offering unique products, improving loyalty, and providing the best experience and advice (e.g., gifts for frequent customers).^(29,30)

Threat of substitute products: Substitutes limit profit potential by offering similar products at a lower cost. The availability and quality of substitutes directly affect demand. To counter this threat, companies must focus on differentiation and added value, using strategies such as promotions or raffles for leftover stock.⁽³¹⁾

CONCLUSIONS

The literature review confirms that business growth, improved competitiveness, and brand positioning in the digital age are intrinsically dependent on the rigorous application of the theoretical foundations of e-commerce and adequate market research. E-commerce, which began with Electronic Funds Transfers (EFT) in the 1970s and reached its massive momentum with the internet in the 1990s, has established itself as a fundamental complement that not only increases productivity and profits but also drastically reduces search and price comparison times, offering global availability by limiting physical and geographical barriers. However, the lack of this digital infrastructure, which includes online stores and social media presence, is a major cause of business failure, as the current business model is concentrated on platforms, considered the “factories of the social media era.” On the other hand, success in this digital environment is inseparable from market intelligence. Market research is crucial for determining whether an economic activity is sustainable over time, providing essential information on consumption in specific niches and customer behavior to define strategy. Online stores are vital because digital activity generates “tons of data” and an “extremely comprehensive information trail,” allowing for the collection of customer habits, preferences, and behaviors, which optimizes marketing campaigns. The difficulty in collecting this information, due to the absence of an online store or digital sales systems, leads to lost opportunities and low profitability. Competitiveness is strengthened through a dual analysis of the

environment. PETSA Macroenvironmental Analysis allows companies to understand external forces: the Political factor, where tariff schemes (safeguards) have affected the intensity of trade and consumer choice; and the Technological factor, where the adoption of ICTs has improved transparency and tracking in the supply chain, increasing confidence in online commerce. At the same time, Microenvironment Analysis (Porter’s Five Forces) is essential for assessing the industry’s ability to generate profits. Companies must focus on differentiation strategies to mitigate high rivalry and the threat of substitute products, while managing the bargaining power of suppliers (through diversification) and the power of customers (through loyalty and added value). Finally, brand positioning is the culmination of these strategies. The brand, defined as a set of ideas structured in the consumer’s mind, must project a consistent identity and value proposition that demonstrates an advantage over the competition. This positioning is achieved by offering functional, emotional, and self-expression benefits, ensuring that added value, such as product quality and customer service, is the key element for differentiation in a saturated market. Therefore, business growth is the direct result of the interdependence between the technological effectiveness of e-commerce and the predictive intelligence derived from market research.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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