

COVID -19- The Inflexion Point for E-Commerce

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Abstract: The objective of the research is to look into and understand how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected E-Commerce businesses, as well as how their value chains have evolved. This paper will assist in gaining professional and practical skills in such situations, particularly to those who intend to pursue a career in E-Commerce. This research aims to serve as a resource for e-commerce companies dealing with the recent crisis or of this kind of pandemics in the future. E-commerce is a revolutionary business model that benefits both businesses and customers by facilitating purchase of high-quality goods and services from a variety of sellers via the internet using a web browser or a web application. E-Commerce has largely supplanted traditional purchasing, particularly during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Many consumers have moved their purchasing patterns away from traditional retailers and toward e-commerce platforms as a result of COVID-19.

This entire study demonstrates and illuminates how consumer behavior has evolved and is migrating toward E-Commerce. It also examines the extent to which the pandemic has improved the e-commerce sales volume. The goal is to study the consequences of COVID-19's spread on the e-commerce trade. The finding of this research may be useful in the study of new digital habits developed by customers during the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, E-Commerce, Consumer, Amazon, Flipkart

1. Introduction

Much of the world was put on lockdown in March 2020, pushing many companies to shut temporarily (Abiadet *al.*, 2020). Electronic commerce, sometimes known as e-commerce, is the online exchange of goods, services, and data. It refers to any activity that takes place directly between a company, its partners, or

its customers using the internet. E-commerce was gaining attraction in the Indian market prior to the pandemic. Many sectors were negatively damaged by the Covid-19 pandemic; however, other firms gained traction after initial hiccups due to the pandemic's unforeseeable scenario. One industry that has grown in the current environment is e-commerce (Bhatti *et al.*, 2020). When traditional shopping became difficult, if not outright, terrifying people were increasingly enticed to shop online. The fact that customers were already fans of Amazon and other online retailers made the transition much easier.

The pandemic has brought to light the critical role of the digital economy, as well as the pressing need to close the digital divide both within and between countries. People across the world have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consumers have also been encouraged to shop online because of their concerns of security. As a result, online businesses and platforms have a lot of chances to grow their sales and revenue. E-commerce is becoming more scalable as more individuals are forced to buy online owing to their fear of visiting physical stores during a pandemic. E-commerce has become a modern buzzword. Customers have turned to online and mobile platforms to purchase food, daily staples, and other things when faced with lockdown regimes and store closures (Dinesh and Muniraju, 2021). As a result of the coronavirus outbreak, consumer buying patterns and payment methods are shifting. Customers can buy a variety of stuff online at any time and from any place that is convenient for them, owing to e-commerce.

According to their convenience, online and traditional markets have distinct ways of conducting business. Because of shelf space constraints, traditional stores can only offer a limited number of product options, whereas online retailers frequently maintain no inventory and transmit client orders directly from manufacturers, avoiding stock and inventory issues. Customers benefit from e-commerce because they do not have to leave their homes and only need to explore.

The two major reasons for increased online sales are:

1. Changed shopping habits: Quarantine has changed people's buying habits. Due to the COVID situation's continuance, these habits have become imprinted. Once stores open, customers will definitely spend more time outside. Consumers have shifted their purchasing habits- from stores, supermarkets, and shopping malls to internet portals for anything from necessities to luxury goods (Andrienko, 2020).
2. An increased number of mobile phones: With the rise of mobile devices, surfing and shopping on the internet have never been easier. Customers can easily shop and place orders for the products using their smart phone which is always in their hand or pocket.

While some businesses are suffering because of the pandemic, others are thriving. This remark applies to a variety of Internet-based businesses, including online entertainment, retail, education, food delivery, and remote work solutions. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic's impact, India's e-commerce business is expected to rise by 84 percent to \$111billion by 2024 (Business Standard, 2021).

The COVID-19 situation is first and foremost a human disaster, necessitating prompt action by businesses to safeguard their revenues. Companies' strategy will need to focus on strengthening their online presence and, in certain circumstances, creating an online company as offline buying declines. While the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 have boosted the appeal of internet shopping, this is a long-term trend that will likely continue well into the post-pandemic era. To take advantage of this, companies must provide shoppers with transparency, open policies, and seamless Omni channel alternatives. As the world came to a halt, it is reasonable to say that e-commerce saved the day, allowing millions of people to stay at home and get what they needed to be delivered right to their door.

2.Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

E-commerce is any form of business transaction that takes place via the internet. E-commerce is defined as the use of a transaction or a commercial transaction that involves the exchange of value in exchange for a product or service (Nakhate and Jain,2020).Retail stores, online payment services, transportation and hotel reservation services, fund transfers, digital wallets, online content, and other viable economic pursuits all fall under the umbrella of e-commerce (Pantelimon et al. 2020).

COVID-19's influence has resulted in an economic crisis and financial restraints affecting both organizations and individuals in the informal and formal spheres. The growth of e-commerce, or digital shopping, has been spurred by the spread of the coronavirus (Kumar et al., 2020; Yang and Ren, 2020).Consumers' online shopping behavior is influenced by demographics, social and psychological factors, user online shopping experience, internet and computer knowledge, website quality and design, product attributes, special offers, different payment options, delivery, and after-sales services (Pandey and Parmar, 2019).

Coronavirus has varying impacts depending on the nature of the product, which implies that COVID-19 has a large influence on some items and a low impact on others (Andrienko, 2020).COVID-19 has a significant impact on global e-commerce, with some negative consequences, but altogether, e-commerce is growing as a result of the virus. Coronavirus made it mandatory for people to use the internet in their daily lives and to make it a habit (Abiad, Arao, &Dagli,2020).

Covid-19 affected a large number of e-commerce businesses. E-commerce is likely to suffer long-term implications as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. E-commerce is a business model that allows consumers and businesses to buy and sell products and services online. Online shopping now accounts for 40% of all internet traffic. According to IBM's research, the covid-19 epidemic accelerated the industry by five years. Furthermore, it is predicted that following the Covid-19, consumers will be more inclined to shop online due to social isolation and staying at home (Sharma, 2020).

2.2 Need for E-Commerce

As per World Trade Organization, now is the opportunity for e-commerce to save the world's trade, and it should intervene with force and energy to highlight its importance and effectiveness in trade and online purchase (WTO, 2020).The traditional company environment and culture have been drastically altered because of COVID-19. This pandemic condition has instilled dread in the corporate community as well as in the minds and actions of consumers (Tayade, 2021).

People in India were reluctant to leave their homes when COVID-19 first appeared, for fear of getting the coronavirus. They are even reluctant to go outdoors and buy basic items. People shifted to E-Commerce sites to purchase important supplies in order to avoid the fear of COVID-19, with some new customers registering to purchase essential commodities during the Lockdown phase. Many people are changing their shopping habits and switching to e-commerce portals (Chaudhary, 2020).

E-commerce is becoming increasingly popular among buyers. The way we work, shop, and engage with people has all changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. People are only going out to get essential items from retail outlets, and they are still afraid of getting infected if they go out to buy essential goods. As COVID-19 arrived in India, the surge in e-commerce demand has been so strong in recent months that the e-commerce business is expected to rise tremendously (Reddy, 2020).

The e-commerce business grew in popularity well before the pandemic, but with the introduction of pandemic lockdown, e-commerce companies have been put under pressure to sell necessary commodities like groceries and medicines, which may be considered as both a difficulty and an opportunity. Previously, purchasing online was a convenience, but today it is a requirement to protect oneself from the virus by avoiding crowded areas. The Covid-19 blockade has resulted an increase in online sales, with the market expected to grow by \$200 billion before 2026 (BasuandRaina, 2020).

2.3 Impact of the Coronavirus on E-Commerce

The Corona virus transformed the nature of business and had a profound impact on worldwide e-commerce. Despite the Covid-19 issue and the slowing economy, India's e-commerce sector has grown since the lockdown, with a 17 % gain in order size as of June 2020 in comparison to the pre-lockdown period (Sharma, 2020). COVID-19 accelerated the industry's growth by 4-6 years! E-commerce had been expanding slowly until COVID-19 put it on a speedy growth. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light them any advantages of e-commerce, particularly in terms of accessibility, safety, and hygiene practices (Tayade, 2021). According to MasterCard's newest Recovery Insights study, in the year 2020, an additional \$900billion was spent on online retail business across the globe. To put it another way, in 2020, e-commerce will account for almost \$1 for every \$5 spent on retail, up from around \$1 for every\$7 spent in 2019 (MasterCard, 2021).

According to IBEF, India's online commerce business will grow from \$30 billion in 2017 to \$200billion by 2026. According to the forecast, India's e-commerce market will surpass that of the United States by 2034, making it the world's second-largest after China (Razor pay, 2020).

Sales of essentials, biscuits, frozen soaps, and hand washes have increased by 100 percent, according to e-grocers such as Big Basket, Grofers, and Amazon. The FMCG business attempted to speed up the supply of goods so that there would be no shortages. Panic buying of FMCG goods occurred as well, with everyone buying in large amounts to store the goods for more than a month. As a result, it is becoming highly difficult for FMCG companies to meet consumer demand (Chaudhary, 2020). The global market for e-commerce is growing at a rapid pace. In India, the low-cost 4G internet plans provide these industries a boost (Chaudhary, 2020).

2.4 Conclusion

The e-commerce landscape is evolving, owing to COVID-19. The impact of COVID-19 on the online sector is more in terms of volume, as well as fears and worries about the viral spread. The Coronavirus has revolutionized the traditional nature of business and has had a big impact on worldwide e-commerce (Radhakrishnan, 2021). COVID-19's influence has resulted in an economic crisis and financial restraints affecting both companies and individuals in the informal and formal spheres. The growth of e-commerce, or digital shopping, has been spurred by the spread of the coronavirus (Kumar et al., 2020; Yang and Ren, 2020).

Given the critical role played by the e-commerce industry throughout the crisis, the pandemic has highlighted the pressing need to bridge the digital divide, both within and between countries.

Many long-standing hurdles to greater engagement in e-commerce by local suppliers, merchants, and customers in developing countries have worsened and remain a barrier. This has drawn attention to the significance of providing efficient and cost-effective information and communications, technology services such as telecom, a smart device, and other IT services, and developing technologies (WTO, 2020).

Owing to the pandemic, many businesses, particularly brick and mortar outlets, have moved to e-commerce, where specific websites and/or applications were created for them, or they joined a third-party platform, to sell and profit. Electronic and brick-and-mortar stores have effectively shifted to an online presence. COVID-19 boosted e-commerce by providing a different approach for individuals to meet their needs during the crisis. COVID-19 had bad consequences for shipments and workforces, but it promoted the expansion of e-commerce, as many businesses successfully transitioned to online platforms. COVID-19 has also had an impact on the lives of customers, as well as their purchasing habits (Sharma, 2020).

According to retail sales forecasts, COVID-19 will have a significant impact on e-commerce, with sales expected to hit \$6.5 trillion by 2023 (Jones, 2020). In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, e-commerce has proven to be a useful method and alternative for customers, as well as an economic driver for small businesses. The pandemic has highlighted the worth of digital technologies (WTO, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

There are mainly three types of research that should be taken into consideration to derive a conclusion—qualitative, quantitative and mixed. In the context of this topic, qualitative research has to be carried out to describe it in more detail. For general understanding, qualitative research means the focus is on understanding a research query based on a humanistic and idealistic approach (Pathak et al, 2013). For qualitative research, the data collection takes place from secondary sources. For specific research, it may also involve the collection of data from both primary and secondary sources, for example, interviews or case studies that are already available online and studies done by previous researchers and scholars on the related topic (Maxwell, 2012).

3.2 Theoretical Perspective

The foremost step in conducting any research is to choose a methodology for the same. The research that involves methodology sets the path right for the readers, observers and experts to be familiar with the subject, gauge the present state, understand key aspects, and provide solutions if needed to conclude. Also, the authenticity and credibility of the source from where the research has been conducted should be taken into account in order to justify the methodology.

3.3 Research Design

As mentioned earlier, a qualitative research methodology has to be adopted for this particular research because the study does not involve statistics and is interpreted through data and subjective reporting. The subjective approach of this research is to observe the changes that have taken place with the e-commerce sector in India during the lockdown, which extended for more than two years due to the global pandemic. What all effects it had on the sellers, buyers, different products, brands and the overall economy of the country due to it. The research can be conducted online by taking interviews, surveys and filling forms as a majority of people are still leading their lives staying back at home. There are chances that some of the respondents refuse to answer all of them or give away dishonest replies. In such a scenario, depending on the secondary resources is ideal to extract the findings related to the topic.

3.4 Ethics

The research has been made keeping in view all the parameters that are regarded as necessary for the study. Besides, the methodology has been implemented as secondary data were used for the same. For data collection, proper citations and referrals have been maintained.

3.5 Scope

The reach of methodology has been quite extensive for clear and efficient research. Amidst the lockdown and pandemic, the e-commerce sector has boomed like anything. It made a smooth entry into the lives of millions who had no other option than to sit at home and order things for which they otherwise do physical shopping. It has also created employment for many who lost their jobs due to the deadly virus and series of lockdowns that followed. Besides, it has generated revenue for several online firms and companies which ventured into the e-commerce sector.

3.6 Summary

The objective of this research is to demonstrate the changes that have taken place in thee-commerce sector during the global pandemic and the series of lockdowns that followed. The methodology makes use of various articles, research papers, journals, websites and reliable sources to make the research more authentic and credible.

4. Discussion and Analysis

To make the layman understand e-commerce, it simply means the business of selling and buying things over the internet. The introduction of the internet in India in 1995 marked the beginning of the first wave of e-commerce in the country. However, the arrival of Amazon India by the website called *amazon.com* in 2013 gradually expanded the e-commerce business across the country. It saw a sharp rise in sales and purchases in early 2020 and continued to grow thereafter. In this regard, it becomes very much important to know key aspects of e-commerce, the factors behind its growth and the changes the sector witnessed pre and post-pandemic. This particular research focuses on all these points and gives out details in an elaborate manner.

4.1 Global pandemic, lockdown and digitalization

The world is witnessing technological advancements with each passing year. India is no exception in this regard. Being ranked second to China in terms of population with the youth under the age of 35 contributing 65 percent of the total population, the demand, supply and exchange of technology is massive and ever-growing (Sharma, 2017).

Smart phones with added features have created a revolution in a quick span of time. Homemakers, students, servicemen, and business class and subject matter experts – everyone is hooked to the gadget that fulfills their demand, especially in a fast-paced world where time has become more crucial than money (Chauhan, 2021).

Covid-19 has affected the lives of millions in India to a great extent. The country, which was already reeling under economic instability, witnessed a sharp decline in almost every sector. Schools were shut down, several went jobless, shops and malls witnessed closure for an indefinite period, so did the manufacturing industries and companies providing different services. Leading a normal, routine life was unimaginable as a series of imposed lockdowns compelled all to stay at home and wait for the situation to get normal (Gavin, et al, 2020).

This uncertain state offered a bright prospect to all those who were eager to shift their business to digital platforms whereas the end-users or buyers found an alternative to the conventional method of buying things. Remote selling via video conferencing, social media posts, and advertisements is what is being preferred today and looks like the future of B2B companies. Consumer behavior also witnessed a drastic change in these two years (Harrison et al, 2020).

On one hand, more than 90 per cent B2B sellers have transitioned to a virtual sales model during Covid-19, the consumers on the other, no longer want to have a lesser professional experience while transacting digitally in return for their purchase.

4.2 Case Study of India – Amazon

This particular section will stress the sales performance of the biggest e-commerce chain in the world, i.e., Amazon.com. Amidst the crashing economy around the globe, it was the only company, proving to be an exception to survive pandemic and do extraordinary business. This case study has been supported by several media reports, research papers and online journals to put forward the details in a credible manner.

Amazon was one of the few companies that benefited from the Coronavirus pandemic, with increasing online sales, setting a record profit in the month of July last year. However, it did not achieve it without facing any challenges. The complete process of its supply chain suffered a major blow which resulted in delays regarding deliveries and notices regarding out-of-stock products (Palmer, 2020).

While talking about its performance, the US-based online giant said it has exported goods that were made in India worth 3 billion dollars and given jobs to over a million people since it began operating there about ten years ago – it minted about 1 billion dollars besides providing 3,00,000 jobs since January 2020 alone.

Moving ahead, the e-commerce giant has set an achievable target for India, i.e., to enable 10 million businesses online, manage e-commerce exports worth 10 billion dollars and create 1 million jobs more in India by 2025 (Rai, 2021).

4.3 Employment in the e-commerce sector during pandemic

While several small and big companies were forced to fire employees due to the pandemic followed by repeat lockdown, sectors like IT and others that required virtual assistance, made sure that they retained their staff by giving them “work from home” option. However, online food ordering and search platforms like Zomato and Swiggy got the opportunity to recruit people who were working in some other field, now jobless but were willing to work for a manageable salary. This was an after-effect of the pandemic which saw a significant rise in the sales and purchase of food items (Mehrotra, 2020).

4.4 Case Study of India – Flipkart

Like other big companies, Walmart’s total sales and operating results too were affected by the global health crisis. However, its majority-owned subsidiary in India, Flipkart surpassed the sales of its gross merchandise value (GMV) products in August 2020.

With the acquisition of Walmart India in July, Flipkart strengthened its wholesale presence, with the operation of the Best Price cash-and-carry business. Furthermore, the online company launched Flipkart Wholesale, a marketplace that looks to transform the grocery retail region by leveraging technology. It ensured both the process of exchange in sales and purchase besides providing employment to the needy (Abrar, 2020).

The e-commerce subsidiary also ensured to indulge in what can be called safe commerce, wherein they are doing business with keeping all the precautionary measures in place for its employees – from top management to the labour section (Flipkart, 2021).

From the customers’ point of view, safe delivery is what matters the most to them than anything else to have a good and satisfying online shopping experience. Competitive prices and ease of return fall in second and third place respectively (Peer Mohamed, 2021).

Since necessity becomes the mother of all inventions, the rise of e-commerce and its gradual expansion over the years can also be seen on similar lines as the world, including India, is shifting towards a virtual world,

where one can instantly order anything with a single click on the mouse or tap on the smart phone. Online transaction of money is also something to be looked upon as it poses a threat to data privacy like sharing the name, address and account details (Lall,2021).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The global pandemic followed by lockdown was unprecedented. It gave a strong jolt to the economic situation across the world and India has been severely affected by it for several obvious reasons. Looking at the growth and advancements in technology, the future of e-commerce is certainly going to be big and bright from the sellers and buyers' point of view. To make it more common and conventional, the spread of digital awareness is very much important among the masses. Instead of considering it as a savior in hard times, the virtual offering should be taken as the need of the hour as it will save our time and money.

The change that the e-commerce sector experienced during the pandemic period has also given a huge impetus to the people who were uncertain about their future of doing business online. The sudden demand for all types of products and their supply through big and small online portals paved a way for all those entrepreneurs who were otherwise hesitant to begin their career with a particular website or online e-commerce portal like Amazon.

The sudden rise in online sales has also brightened the job prospects for all those who possess technical and non-technical skills but were laid off by the companies. From warehouse keeping to product marketing and promotion, everything is being streamlined online with the help of dedicated teams and groups to expedite the trading process in order to make customers' experiences worthy.

The B2B and B2C experience should also be taken into account while talking about the scope and prospect of e-commerce. Online shopping has also given a definite push to the transaction management platforms like Razorpay, Paytm, Google Pay, Bhim UPI and others which serve as the gateway and make money on a per-transaction basis.

Looking at all the aspects, it is a win-win situation for all the focused groups that have been part of or going to be part of the e-commerce sector. Increased digital awareness among the masses, sellers and buyers will have a significant impact on the overall process of online sales and marketing.

As for recommendations, the established online companies should back the start-ups and growing ones to create a cohesive environment and make a strong supply chain and management in order to cater to the customers' needs and grow one's business simultaneously. All the points, data, quotes and figures have been extracted from websites, study papers, journals, opinion pieces and excerpts to support the research.

To conclude, it would be appropriate to state that the e-commerce space would grow exponentially in the coming years, looking at the seller and user experience. Generous investment in the digital infrastructure by the Government of India and the private players will improve the current economic scenario. Individuals with technical expertise and entrepreneurship skills can help to provide jobs to youth at various positions, which would minimize the unemployment rate to a certain extent.

A proactive and futuristic approach with a good strategy to attract customers can make the whole experience worthy to share with future generations who are staring at the virtual world that is filled with ample challenges and opportunities.

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