

New mechanisms and forms of e-commerce as a factor of improving business competitiveness

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Abstract. The paper examines new mechanisms and forms of e-commerce emerged during the crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic and given the impulse to the development of the online economy. It prompted entrepreneurs to transform business management practices and models to find optimal supply chains to find ways to increase competitiveness. The digital technologies become ontological while digital platforms continue to evolve through ecosystems. The online economy begins to shape new items of leadership and conditions for e-marketplace interactions in the competitive conditions. The authors focus on the analysis of the patterns influencing changes in e-commerce forms, methods and mechanisms. The aim of the paper is to identify e-commerce in the entrepreneurial ecosystem as a factor of business competitiveness. The paper dwells on the exploration of the use of new forms of entrepreneurship in e-commerce including technological one.

Keywords: e-commerce, fierce competition, monopolistic pressure of big capital, rivalry for the consumer, technological entrepreneurship, «low-touch economy», marketplaces, online shopping

JEL codes: L26; O3; D41

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Introduction

2022 is characterised by the continuing pandemic of COVID-19, the economic crisis and the presence of a «low-touch economy». The socio-economic and political transformation during the COVID-19 pandemic initially led to widespread disruption in business processes: global supply chains and logistics were disrupted, borders were closed, quarantine and distant work were implemented. In this context, many businesses were forced to adopt to the new digital technologies; the pandemic expanded the range of entrepreneurial opportunities globally, which is particularly relevant for the Russian Federation. Indeed, its share of world markets for advanced manufacturing does not exceed 0.6%, nor does hi-tech in general (no more than 0.5%), with the exception of nuclear technology (16.7% of the world market) and armaments (1.2%) (Simachev et al., 2021). Nowadays there is a little involvement of Russia into global markets for advanced manufacturing due to low levels of technological entrepreneurship and modern business models, as well as low quality, non-competitiveness of many products and political biases.

Gradually adapting to the «low-touch economy» and new forms of interaction, many entrepreneurs rapidly began to digitalize business processes and accumulate large amounts of data. Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics, blockchain and the Internet of Things (IoT) begin to penetrate e-commerce on a large scale. The search and processing of information are the main objects of activity. It prompted entrepreneurs to find optimal supply chains as quickly as possible, to adjust personnel policies, to pay more attention to employee skills, especially in business process analytics and to transform business management practices, which are major sources of the company competitive advantages. The establishment and development of digital platforms and ecosystems continued, modifying the way work is organised. The «low-touch economy» transformed the

nature of market competition, its modes and environment.

Digitalisation and the online economy become a fundamental trend in the development of global, international and most national economies; they shape new factors of leadership and competitiveness in the global marketplace, as well as conditions for effective interaction between innovative and active market participants. It is the core of e-commerce Competition, which plays a major role in improving the quality of life of the population, is intensifying. There is a fierce struggle for the consumers who want something new and different with a familiar brand from the comfort of his or her own home. Digitalisation is a guarantee of economic security and state sovereignty in the 21st century (Yudina et al., 2022).

Methodology

Scientists worldwide pay attention to digitalisation, entrepreneurial ecosystems, platform economies and the online economy. D. Cho, P. Ryan, G. Buchuni (Cho, et al., 2021) studied the entrepreneurial ecosystem as an institutional regulating structure. By D. Isenberg, the entrepreneurial ecosystems enhance business opportunities in e-commerce (Isenberg, 2021). P. Roundy, B. Brockman and M. Bradshaw studied the characteristics of ecosystems, their susceptibility to initial conditions of establishment (Roundy et al., 2017). E. Stam considered the entrepreneurial ecosystems spanning the regional, national and international levels and their impact on the economy and competitiveness (Stam, 2015). Freeman (2002); Lundvall et al. (2002); Cooke (2001); Spigel and Harrison (2018); Malecki (2018) focused on the creation of mobile and efficient national ecosystems and their role in the online economy. P. Jiang et al (Jiang et al., 2020) pointed e-commerce as an integral part of ecosystems.

M. Colombo et al. examined the rapidly growing innovative entrepreneurship and nascent new governance models. Also they noted the open innovation participants have significant advantages in enhancing innovativeness (Colombo et al., 2021). J. Sheth (Sheth, 2020) dwelled on the establishment of large digital platforms emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the «low-touch economy» one. I.Z. Geliskhanov, T.N. Yudina studied the improving of «digital economy» business efficiency through the digital platforms (Geliskhanov, et al., 2018). The increased needs of entrepreneurs during the pandemic, not only for business success, including electronic business but also for personal well-being and health were in the focus of S. Lee and D. Lee (Lee et al., 2021). Authors agreed with P. Davidsson et al., who focused on the new opportunities for entrepreneurship, creating and offering previously unknown products and services in the COVID-19 period (Davidsson et al., 2020). C. Kirk and L. Rifkin (Kirk et al., 2020) considered the digitalisation as a faster pace in response to the «low-touch economy» as a potential transition to a new technological order and new forms of trade. Liguori and Pitts (Liguori et al., 2020) discussed the challenges of digitalisation for small businesses, their great potential in e-commerce and the resources required for this purpose.

J. Arauzo-Carod, A. Segarro-Blasco, and M. Taruel focused on the role of technology parks in the digitalisation of Spain's autonomous community, Catalonia, which are in direct proportion to the level of cluster development and innovation as a source of productivity improvement, including e-commerce (Arauzo-Carod et al., 2018). The American economist S. Sharma argued the interconnectedness of communications, computerisation and information in terms of digital economy (Sharma, 2018). The authors questioned S. Sharma's ideas about the digital economy uses ideas rather than material resources in economic activity, are controversial. F. Eggers (Eggers, 2020) explored the crisis of the economy as an opportunity to expand transformation for entrepreneurship. P. Tingvall and J. Widenward (Tingvall et al., 2018) pointed to the need to use best practice and highly skilled staff in the digital economy.

By the literature review, many researchers considered the issues of digitalisation in detail but the role of e-commerce in the business ecosystem is not sufficiently explored, especially in transition economies with resource constraints, particularly in the Russian Federation. There is a deficit of work examining the impact of e-commerce on business competitiveness. In this context, the aim of the study is to show the importance of e-commerce in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and platform economy as a factor having a huge impact on business competitiveness. The aim of this work is to consider the new mechanisms and forms of e-commerce,

both in Russia and in foreign countries. The research hypothesis is the potential of applying new forms of entrepreneurship based on the latest scientific advances, such as technological entrepreneurship, e-commerce and its use by Russian companies on a global scale, which would contribute to the competitiveness of the Russian economy. The methodology of the research is based on the application of institutional-economic, constructivist methods, general scientific methods within the framework of comparative, logical analysis and synergetic approach.

Results

K. Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum and his co-author T. Mallere highlighted the obvious pandemic systems changes that were evident even before the crisis: a partial shift away from globalisation, an acceleration of digitalisation (Schwab et al., 2020). Internet innovation, the network productivity rise had a decisive impact not only on the quality of life of a huge number of people, but also on business, which resources redistributed from traditional companies to IT ones. For example, the combined wealth of the 7 richest US IT billionaires in 2021 is estimated to be \$925 billion, surpassing the total wealth of all 103 billionaires from finance and investment, the 2nd most profitable industry in the ranking (Kai, 2021). The World Economic Forum 2022 viewed the «digital divide» as an imminent threat to the 3 billion people without access to the Internet (The Global Risks Report 2022).

Today companies increasingly focused on modern technology of business processes to the purchase of goods. The online economy expanded significantly during the pandemic. Banks are predominantly serving businesses and households online, cash circulation reduced significantly and importance of cryptocurrency is growing. During the pandemic many new companies emerged and started to grow rapidly thanks to the development of e-commerce: online shops (primarily marketplaces), logistics and IT companies. Many companies have significantly upgraded their facilities through the construction of modern warehouses and logistics centres and optimized their workforce.

There was a breakdown of supply chains due to the constraints of the covid pandemic. Businesses began to stockpile products, leading to a sharp demand for storage space. This led to the emergence of a new format of warehouse real estate – fulfilment centres, combining the role of a conventional warehouse and a factory-sorting facility for shipping orders to online shoppers. They become the core elements of the marketplaces supply chains and have shortened the time it takes for customers to receive their orders, creating a huge demand for automation and robotisation, which has long been held back by the low labour cost in the Russian Federation. The pandemic along with the economic crisis were a triggers for the instant growth of automation and robotised warehousing and the proliferation of e-commerce, increasing the quality and comfort of life.

Nowadays, manufacturers try to reach consumers with a high degree of engagement at a low cost of online advertising. The information technology is making a huge difference in terms of remembering individual consumer choices. It allows to study and form users' preferences in detail along with creating a positive brand image for the products and improving company's brand awareness. Ultimately it leads to increased competition for suppliers of goods and services.

To be competitive retailers and producers need to understand not only the consumers' needs but also the benefits of the product's delivery mode, its packaging and the ways of cost cutting. Harvard Business School economist M. Porter, one of the leading experts in the field of competition studies, identified 3 main competitive strategies: 1. cost leadership strategy; 2. differentiation strategy; 3. focus strategy (Porter, 2003). The cost leadership strategy lies in a firm's ability to set low prices and occupy a significant market share. For example, the discounters chains Svetofor, Dobrotsen and Fix Price started not only to sell cheaper goods, but also to deliver them to the consumer with high operational efficiency. The development of online sales is their additional option.

They generate profits through cost-cutting and efficient use of retail stores space. Also they save on shop decoration, so their outlets resemble shopping warehouses. The differentiation strategy is based on selling goods to a specific category of customers seeking to rationalise demand. The focus strategy is to better satisfy customers than competitors. As a result, hard discounter (low-price shop) sales in 2021 grew by more than

35% to more than RUB 620 bn (with overall food sales up 11.1% to RUB 18.4 trillion), and their share of total retail sales in the country increased from 2.8% to 3.4%. Svetofor was the best one (Ganzhur, 2021). Such shops provide the customer's sustainable consumption, which is becoming a trend not only in Russia, but even in Europe, where Svetofor started its shops, too.

In analysis, in order to achieve competitive advantage, it is essential to choose the right competitive strategy in a particular market segment; to form new business models; to adapt immediately to changes in the external environment; to sell innovative, competitive and low-cost products; to have mobile, modern logistics and AI capabilities to handle substantial amounts of information; to make efficient use of human resources capacity; and to manage the market situation through price changes, which is particularly important during crisis and pandemic, when there is a decline in living standards of the majority of the population.

A company's choice of strategy also depends on the global, national and market situation in a large extent. In the pandemic, for example, many companies began making home deliveries, which increased sales and customer loyalty to the outlet. Underpricing is aimed at capturing as much of the market as possible. The company must have large production capacities accessible for the network only. Digitalisation is not only changing the structure of economies and business models, but there is also a rapid increase in digitalisation of consumers, which is country-specific. For example, in the USA 81.6% of population use computers, in compare with 77.0% of Germany and 68.5% of Russia (Top Countries by Smartphone Users, 2021).

Digitalization technologies closely related to the new services and digital products are developing rapidly. Today, the IoT or technological networks of systems and platforms interacting with each other and the external environment is increasingly important for both businesses and users, leading to optimisation of business processes, improved interaction between suppliers and consumers, increased resource efficiency and cost reductions. The IoT was relatively slow in the period up to 2020, but now it is increasingly penetrating the lives of individuals. The current rapid development of the industrial and consumer IoT transforms the patterns and modes of interaction between subjects and objects.

One of the leaders of the IoT is the Canadian business smartphone company BlackBerry, which started working in the field of wireless data in 1984 and started the online smartphone shop in 2009. Today BlackBerry Limited leads the US smartphone sales, its capitalization is \$ 6.88 bn. The main competitive advantage of this company is a very high level of data protection. That is why about half of Forbes' top businesses use its cybersecurity technologies. Its products are popular in the most countries of the world. It has active partnerships with the Google, Amazon and Microsoft cloud platforms.

Traditionally, the four US technology companies – Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon (so called, GAFA) and two Chinese companies – Alibaba and Tencent – are considered the largest international ecosystems working at different platforms together. Accessible markets with high-developed infrastructure and quality human capital of staff are some of their most important components. They are increasingly influencing the global economy through financial strength and a large number of customers, including the online commerce sector. The American multinational corporation Google began by developing search. Nowadays it is a multinational retailer, thanks to a perfectly functioning supply ecosystem and high-established supply chains. Google operates more than 1 million servers in data centres around the world and spends \$200 - \$250 mln annually on IT equipment.

Entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) and digital platforms (DPs) are increasingly influencing the development of entrepreneurship and shaping its new business opportunities, including e-commerce. DPs are a web-based IT system facilitating the team action of platform members, enabling the instant exchange of external resources and innovation to create new products and services. They promote technological entrepreneurship. Its competitive edge is based on an innovative high-tech idea. The shift to a platform economy is driven by the exhaustion of the potential of traditional business models and the urgent need to break down geographical boundaries, leading to the rapid distribution of goods and services around the world. As a result, today digital platforms and the platform ecosystems transform entire industries and various types of socio-economic activity, becoming drivers of economic growth, innovation and competition (Geliskhanov, 2018).

Digital platforms not only provide fast and high-quality communications, but also focus comprehensive user information and lower barriers to market entry. In the digital economy data become a form of capital. However, economic advantages can only be obtained by those firms that have effective business technologies and ways of processing them. Initially, the platforms originated as advertisements for goods, but over time they have evolved into technology giants that set the «rules of the game». Services provided through Internet platforms save a great deal of time searching for goods, and linking multiple platforms into an ecosystem allows users to enter a single password and login across platforms, which increases the speed of shopping and quality of life.

The Bank of Russia considers SBER as the largest platform in the Russian Federation. It is continuously building up its non-financial services ecosystem by acquiring companies in various sectors of the economy. The core of the ecosystem are SberX and a number of research labs (Robotics, Blockchain, Artificial Intelligence) responsible for coordinating complex ecosystem development in terms of shaping a better customer experience (Ecosystems, 2021). The analysis of SBER's ecosystem establishment shows the constant growth of the new start-ups. They contribute to the credibility of its business environment, supporting small businesses, analysing business inventories, entering into partnerships of all kinds, and creating joint ventures with other companies. SBER is currently completing the creation of a box solution for an online shop, enabling entrepreneurs to put their goods on the shelves of all kinds of marketplaces very quickly. It forms an online trading holding company and divides its ecosystem into two: for business and for people. SBER's activities can be classified as technological entrepreneurship, based on an innovative high-tech ideas. The contribution of technological entrepreneurship to a country's economic development is reflected in the emergence of start-ups, the rapid growth and adoption of innovation and technology and the creation of new businesses and jobs.

SBER studies and analyses the market in detail, taking into account the needs of both corporate clients and the ordinary people. It also actively develops the own marketplace SberMegaMarket. SBER announced plans to invest about \$3 bn into logistics for e-commerce development in 2022-2023 (Skrynnikova, 2021). Thus, SBER creates a new network – a virtual ecosystem that will revolutionize the structure. However, while SBER's net income rose 1.7 times in 3Q of 2021, approaching RUB 1 trillion, the ecosystem business is still making a loss for the 3Q in a row. Whereas SBER's global objective is to increase the share of non-financial businesses in its revenue. SBER invested \$2 bln in the ecosystem development (Arutyunov, 2021). Although in many countries, financial institutions are prohibited from non-financial activities of financial companies.

VK (former Mail.Ru Group) is forming an ecosystem of more than 200 projects from its assets and services. Recently Pixonic, Yula, and taxi aggregator Citymobile emerged their own autonomous ecosystems. Delivery Club is very popular in the segment of food and grocery delivery. VK is going to invest more than \$60 mn into online shop AliExpress Russia (Skrynnikova, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the «low-touch economy» accelerated the use of remote communication channels leading to a huge increase in online ordering of goods and services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, online retailer Wildberries significantly increased its sales and became the number one Russian retailer in terms of turnover, which in 2021 was RUB 844 bn, approximately 1.9 times higher than the second largest Russian marketplace Ozon (Yuzbekova et al., 2021). There are 14 million people shopping on Wildberries every day. The fortune of T. Bakalchuk, the main owner of the Wildberries online shops, is estimated at \$13 bn. Forbes ranked her 13th, she became the 2021 leader in terms of percentage of wealth growth (Tairov, 2021). Wildberries builds distribution centres in many areas of the country and recently acquired its own bank. The largest sales volumes were in digital appliances, electronics, accessories, children's goods, clothes and shoes. The market of online sales of clothing and footwear in Russia increased to 21% of the total online market. It developed business models differ from those in Europe. For example, in Russia there are «try-on» orders, whereas in the West there is a after purchase return practice. There is a common practice to pay after purchase in the Russian Federation, whereas in other countries prepayment is valid.

The Ozon marketplace is not yet focused more on profits, but on building infrastructure, R&D, investing and developing new areas, IT, marketing, building large warehouses (for example, in the Orientir West logistics park on the Novorizhskoye Highway in Moscow) and the Ozon Express fast delivery service, i.e.

there is fighting for the consumer. At the same time, the company's costs per order have fallen even though their volumes at Ozon have increased significantly (Skrynnikova, 2021).

E-commerce platforms are becoming increasingly important in the digital economy. For example, the online marketplace is the intermediary between supplier and buyer. It is an innovative way of organising sales and can be described as a type of technological entrepreneurship. Today, marketplaces define the dynamics of the online commerce market. The competitive advantage is based on an innovative high-tech ideas, and the creation of new products and services is linked to the use of scientific knowledge and technology. Marketplaces provide information about third-party products or services, offering customers a website to sell products from various companies. They also facilitate the exchange of new information between businesses and enable better analysis of offers and competitors. Famous Chinese ecosystem Alibaba, which has over 65 million users from 240 countries and is one of the largest sources of borrowing customers for the Chinese banking sector, also grew out of a commodity marketplace (Kheifets et al., 2021).

The main business model of the e-economy is Business-to-Customer – B2C, conducting e-commerce between legal entities and individuals. Many of the same products are sold online from different sellers, but they are priced differently. For example, clothes are sold at online shops like Lamoda.ru, Ozon.ru, Beru.ru (SBER and Yandex marketplace), Yandex Market, etc. As marketplaces bring together products from a wide range of suppliers and each manufacturer has its own page, the choice of products here is very wide. In addition, the user has fairly comprehensive information on the product suppliers, increasing the credibility.

The increased investment into the logistical infrastructure of the marketplaces made it possible to cover remote areas with online retail. For example, the new universal platform of the Novosibirsk footwear company OR Group is being integrated into the logistics infrastructure of the online shopping market and works with the e-commerce marketplace leader Wildberries (Kalyanina, 2022).

The widespread development of marketplaces provides small and medium-sized businesses with the potential to enter the market on a national scale and ensures their survival and profitability in times of crisis. Marketplaces contributes the increase of the small businesses activity. They set up personal pages to sell goods in online shops and open departments in shopping malls. According to Wildberries study in 2021, the share of young entrepreneurs under 25 selling through the marketplace increased 2.5 times, driven by the growth of digitalisation. About half of the entrepreneurs present on the marketplace buy goods from Russian producers or make them themselves. Almost half of them increased their sales in 2021 by 10-100%, and 15% of the sellers doubled the income (Kalyanina, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic producers from the Russian Federation also began to increase their exports through marketplaces. Its main share consists of is food, drinks and alcohol. For example, the first 10 months of 2021 Wildberries increased the export turnover of Russian entrepreneurs by 44% and reached RUB 29 bln. (Novikova, 2021). Marketplaces operate on a cross-border system allows goods to be sold by storing them in one country and sending them out all over the world. The development of e-commerce makes it possible to widely advertise products unfamiliar to foreign consumers and to inform them about their storage, consumption and effects on the human body.

Today, all retailers operating offline have set up their own online shops, increased their presence on marketplaces and enter the market with their own platforms. Wholesale marketplaces started to appear. Thus, by the initiative of the Russian Union of Entrepreneurs of Textile Industry, a wholesale marketplace, Legprom.cloud was formed. It serves as a platform for attracting suppliers and manufacturers in this sector, in order to create synergies. A single digital marketplace enables the expansion of markets and the reduction of costs. Many companies today are constantly looking for the business partners. Foreign businesses are shown interest to the project. For example, IKEA produces up to 60% of the products sold in Russia and plans to increase it up to 80% by 2025 (Inkizhinova, 2021).

Discussion

The hypothesis of the study concerning new forms of entrepreneurship based on the innovative science and practice, such as technological entrepreneurship, can be used in e-commerce was confirmed. The results

of the study agree with the works of P. Jiang (Jiang et al., 2020) and M. Colombo (Colombo et al., 2021), who noted the great importance of innovativeness and modern logistics in e-commerce.

However, there are no institutions in the Russian Federation to support technological initiatives and start-ups, which is the basis for technological entrepreneurship. The potential for Russian companies to use e-commerce on a global scale has also been confirmed. However, the products of Russian firms engaged in electronic commerce abroad are not yet widely accepted in most countries. Many companies have a weak competitive advantages. In most cases, they are lacking accessible markets with high-developed infrastructure and quality human capital, a high-established supply chain and a large customer base.

In terms of e-commerce and digitalisation in general, there is an evolution of forms of capital influenced by digital technology. But along with real capital, fictitious, virtual, digital capital, primarily represented by securities on financial markets, is becoming increasingly important and serves as a source of crises (Katsonov, 2015). IT systems lead to a significant increase of the supplier company power. Competition for resources and markets both globally and within national economies is intensifying. Competition between firms increasingly turns into fierce competition. There is fierce competition among companies for government contracts in the USA, China and the Russian Federation. The leaders of many countries force national businesses to comply with the geopolitical interests of the state, even at times to the detriment of their profits. The role of the state increases and competition becomes manageable. In the US, for example, the authorities, by of geopolitical interests, force businesses to turn down profitable international contracts, while companies spend huge sums on political lobbying. Consequently, the economy is increasingly subject to monopolistic pressures from big capital, which benefits from state support. The centralisation of capitalism increases and A. Smith's «invisible hand» turns to monopolies.

Conclusion

Digital technology, e-commerce become not only an alternative form of communication for online users but also institutions that supply them with a wide range of products both Russian and foreign. By purchasing quickly they not only save time but also gain access to brand information and have the opportunity to learn public opinion on the quality of these products. E-commerce contributes to the development of small and medium-sized businesses and thanks to modern technology and new mechanisms increases a firm's competitiveness. Emerging as an anti-crisis measure, the «low touch economy», including e-commerce, transformed the way companies operate, shifting the focus from chasing efficiency by eliminating weaknesses, to building resilience and competitiveness through investment into innovation. The way of compete changed, transactions became digital rapidly, and the pace of new technology adoption increased dramatically, as radical change sometimes leads to cutting-edge innovation. Another trend in the Russian Federation today is the acquisition of e-commerce businesses by banks, while marketplaces have started to buy their own banks.

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