

Implementation of an e-commerce sales channel for small and medium-sized businesses

Implementación de un canal de venta de e-commerce para pequeñas y medianas empresas

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Abstract

E-commerce has transformed sales strategies, providing various options for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The surge of e-commerce has posed significant challenges for SMEs, especially due to the rise of massive sellers during the COVID-19 crisis. This research stems from the need to understand how SMEs can implement e-commerce strategies effectively and profitably. The objective is to analyze key factors such as costs, product variety, user experience, brand positioning, and reputation, to offer strong recommendations to SMEs in their choice of digital sales channels. This study compares three e-commerce channels: online stores, social media, and marketplaces. A detailed review of existing literature and an exploratory analysis evaluating different key factors was conducted. Specific criteria are used to compare and contrast these options. Some of the results suggest that online stores and social media offer greater control and customization, although they entail initial costs and constant development. Marketplaces, while optimizing sales, can limit brand customization and reputation. The findings suggest evaluating the objectives and needs of the SME before choosing an e-commerce channel.

SMEs, e-commerce, Marketplace

Resumen

El e-commerce ha transformado las estrategias de venta, ofreciendo diversas opciones a las pequeñas y medianas empresas (PyMEs). El e-commerce ha presentado desafíos significativos para las PyMEs, debido al auge de vendedores masivos durante la crisis del COVID-19. Esta investigación surge de la necesidad de entender cómo las PyMEs pueden implementar estrategias de e-commerce de manera efectiva y rentable. El objetivo es analizar factores clave como costos, variedad de productos, experiencia del usuario, posicionamiento de marca y reputación, para proporcionar recomendaciones sólidas a las PyMEs en su elección de canales de venta digital. Este estudio compara tres canales de comercio electrónico: tiendas en línea, redes sociales y Marketplaces. Se realizó una revisión detallada de la literatura existente y un análisis exploratorio que evalúa diferentes factores clave. Se utilizan criterios específicos para comparar y contrastar estas opciones. Algunos de los resultados sugieren que las tiendas en línea y las redes sociales brindan mayor control y personalización, aunque implican costos iniciales y desarrollo constante, los marketplaces, mientras optimizan la venta, pueden limitar la personalización y reputación de la marca. Los resultados sugieren evaluar los objetivos y necesidades de la PyME, antes de elegir un canal de comercio electrónico.

PyMEs, Comercio electrónico, Tienda en línea

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Introduction

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Instagram Has a Significant Impact on Online Shopping of Goods

Hypothesis H4 is confirmed. The analysis supports the idea that Instagram exerts a significant impact on online purchase decisions, with a coefficient of 1.34. This suggests that Instagram influences respondents' online shopping behaviour, especially in the context of luxury products (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Hypothesis 5 (H5): WhatsApp Exerts a Significant Impact on Online Shopping of Items
Hypothesis H5 is confirmed. The results indicate that WhatsApp has a significant impact on online shopping, with a coefficient of 0.96. This supports the idea that WhatsApp influences online shopping decisions due to its widespread popularity and widespread use (Ebrahimi et al., 2021; Miah et al., 2022).

Hypothesis 6 (H6): YouTube, Pinterest, Messenger and TikTok Have an Insignificant Impact on Online Shopping for Items

Hypothesis H6 is confirmed. YouTube, Pinterest, Messenger and TikTok platforms have a negligible impact on online shopping, according to the results of the analysis. This suggests that these social networks have limited influence on respondents' online shopping decisions compared to the previously mentioned platforms.

Conclusions

The analyses conducted within the framework of this research, which include heat graph and logistic regression analysis, provide substantial evidence on the main social networks that influence respondents' online shopping behaviour in 2022, according to data obtained from the ENDUTIH survey (INEGI, 2023). Important findings related to the influence of age on online purchasing decisions also emerge.

Firstly, it has been identified that the most prominent social networks in their influence on online shopping are Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. These platforms have been shown to have a significant impact on online purchasing decisions, as evidenced by the coefficients obtained through logistic regression analysis. Specifically, it is highlighted that the independent variables Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp have a significant weight on online shopping, with coefficients indicating their positive influence on respondents' online shopping behaviour.

In contrast, the hypothesis that age plays a significant role in online shopping has been rejected. Although this factor was initially analysed as a potentially influential variable, the results of the analysis indicate that its impact on online shopping is insignificant compared to the effect of the social networks mentioned above.

Literature review

Researchers in northern Portugal conducted a study to analyse the impact of e-commerce on small businesses in the retail sector, taking as a sample company managers, considering the age of the company, the age of the managers, organisational readiness of the company, infrastructure costs for adoption, return on investment and customer knowledge. The results showed that 62.50% of the analysed companies had an increase in their financial results after adopting e-commerce. The authors indicate that the influencing factors are organisational readiness, business partners, infrastructure and human resource costs, return on investment perceived by managers, and customer knowledge and awareness (Carvalho & Mamede, 2018).

According to Song B., in Shanghai in 2023, there are different platforms, both open source and private. Where both have advantages as well as disadvantages. The results suggest that an open strategy improves performance by allowing suppliers to sell their products, improving the shopping experience for consumers. It also indicates that differentiation between different platforms does not necessarily reflect an improvement in profitability, as similar strategies do not differentiate them in comparison to traditional organisations.

Thus, differentiation is not necessarily the best strategy in an online competitive environment (Song, Xu, & Zhao, 2023). For open source platforms, it highlights the initial cost and flexibility that exists, a large community of active developers, and high scalability. There are different plans, and different additional services, basic plans, premium plans, and even some free or trial periods. There are also additional services such as fulfilment, which is the storage, preparation and shipping of products, which can be carried out directly by the company or outsourced. Advertising, which the user allocates a daily budget (Sun, Lyu, Yu, & Teo, 2020). One of the big disadvantages is the technical complexity and limited support, companies can rely on direct support from the platform, and access to forums or online resource is required. So technical expertise is required to develop solutions according to the needs of the company (Bravo, Gonzalez Segura, Temowo, & Samaddar, 2022). Therefore, time and resources are required to be able to configure and maintain it (Carvalho & Mamede, 2018).

On the other hand, in Spain, an analysis was conducted on the survival of companies that consider a hybrid strategy between physical shop and e-commerce, considering 632 new e-commerce companies. In which 32,226 articles were evaluated, identifying the most relevant topics and authors, considering the buyer-seller relationship, business model, technology, organisational structure and technology acceptance model as the most prominent topics, and some authors such as P. A. Pavlou, D. Gefen, F. D. Davis, (Cuellar-Fernández, Fuentes-Callén, & Serrano-Cinca, 2021).

In Morocco, a study was conducted analysing 4 small companies, to measure the level of adoption for e-commerce, emphasising the impediments that companies have, considering categories such as technological, financial, cultural and organisational sector (Salma Dahbi, 2019). On the other hand, one of the big disadvantages can be the limited support, as directly the company will not provide you with the advice, in most cases. There is a technical complexity, i.e. technical knowledge is required to be able to keep the platform operating correctly. Therefore, time and resources are required to implement an option in a functional way (Bravo, Segura, Temowo, & Samaddar, 2022).

In the case of Mexico, according to its current legislation, when the seller is an individual, the platform withholds 10% sales tax per platform; if the seller is a legal entity, the platform does not withhold any tax (Ley de Impuesto sobre la Renta, 2021).

Methodology

A literature review of previous research was carried out, implementing e-commerce for small and medium enterprises, making an exploratory analysis evaluating the key factors in order to make a comparison between e-commerce itself, social networks and Marketplace.

Reviewing the bibliography and references of companies that offer e-commerce services, analysing the selected variables, in order to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each channel.

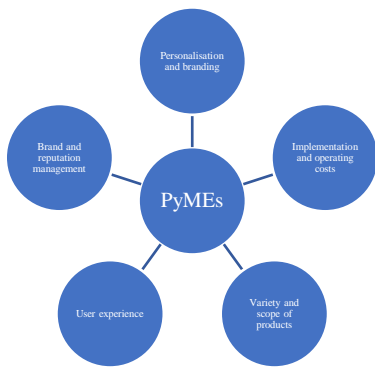
The variables to be used are listed and defined in table 1.

Initial cost	One-time payment at the start of implementation, payment of licenses, software, plugins, hosting, domain, memberships, among others (Martinez-Lopez, Li, Feng, Liu, & Lopez-Lopez, 2022).
Monthly cost	Monthly payment for the use of the platform service (Martinez-Lopez, Li, Feng, Liu, & Lopez-Lopez, 2022).
Cost per sale	Payment per sale made (Martinez-Lopez, Li, Feng, Liu, & Lopez-Lopez, 2022).
Cost of payment gateway	Pay-per-transaction (Shopify, 2023).
Advertising	Paid advertising service.
Outsourced Fulfillment	Warehousing, preparation and shipping of products by a third party (MercadoLibre, 2023)
Multicategory	Handling of products from different categories or industries.
User-friendly interface	Easy handling of the platform, both sellers and buyers.
Configuration and customisation	The platform allows for high or low customisation, either of the interface or of the configuration of options (Shopify, 2023)
Own brand positioning	Brand positioning within the platform is possible (Shopify, 2023).
Creation of promotions	The platform allows you to generate discounts.
Creation of packages or bundles	The platform directly allows you to create packages of different products.
Reputational impact	The management of the seller's reputation and trustworthiness within the platform.

Table 1 Variables to be analysed

Analysis and results

As there are different criteria for comparison, the indicators that were evaluated in other research were considered and new variables were integrated that were considered relevant according to the documentary review that was carried out, in order to establish a frame of reference between the different platforms. The indicators that were considered are listed in graphic 1 and table 2.



Graphic 1 Indicators to assess

Indicator	Reference
Implementation and operating costs	(Martinez-Lopez, Li, Feng, Liu, & Lopez-Lopez, 2022)
Variety and scope of products	(Wakil, Alyari, Ghasvari, Lesani, & Rajabion, 2020)
User experience	(Kim, 2022)
Personalisation and branding	(Bell, McCloy, Butler, & Vogt, 2020)
Brand and reputation management	(Changchit, Klaus & Treerotchananon, 2012)

Table 2 Indicators

Cost of implementation and operation

As mentioned in the literature review, there are different plans, depending on each platform. To simplify the analysis, the basic plan was considered, and it is only indicated if it is possible to outsource the fulfilment service and if there is an option to offer advertising (Sun, Lyu, Yu, & Teo, 2020). Table 3 details the main platforms in Mexico and a breakdown of their corresponding costs.

Concept	Shopify (Basic)	Facebook / Instagram	MercadoLibre	Amazon
C. Initial	13 USD (plus use of templates or software)	N/A	N/A	N/A
C. Monthly	19 USD	N/A	N/A	600 MXN
C. for sale	2%	N/A	15% + \$25 (>\$149) 15%* + \$30 (>\$298) 15% + \$100 (<\$298)	8-15%*
C. Payment gateway	3.49% + IVA + \$4.00 + IVA	Varied	N/A	N/A
Advertising	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outsourced Fulfillment	No	No	Yes	Yes

Table 3 Implementation and operation costs
 Source: Own elaboration with (Shopify, 2023) (Meta, 2023) (Meta, 2023) (MercadoLibre, 2023) (Amazon, 2023)

As can be seen in table 3, each channel has its corresponding breakdown, has very specific rules to consider, and the payment of commissions and taxes for the use of digital platforms, as is the case in Mexico, must be taken into account. Doing a quick analysis, we could deduce that the first options, an online shop (Shopify) and social networks (Facebook/Instagram), are more economical. Since the cost per sale is lower, and could even be zero. In the case of advertising, it can be implemented in all four channels, but the reach that each one would have and the segmentation options that each one could have would have to be analysed (Ruifang, 2023). In the case of outsourced fulfillment service, which is an option used mainly by marketplaces, the relevance of the service in the digital market should be analysed, as using this service can provide more exposure for greater sales reach and benefits to the buyer.

Variety and scope of products

Category management is important in e-commerce, since, in a clothing shop, one does not expect to find tools, or electronic items. In the case of a Marketplace, it is possible to sell multi-categories, since by having an extensive assortment of products (from different sellers), the buyer accesses the category, and not the products offered by each seller. Table 4 shows which channels allow multi-category sales.

	Shopify	Facebook / Instagram	MercadoLibre	Amazon
Multicategory	No	No	Yes	Yes

Table 4 Variety and scope of products

User experience

The design of the online shop depends on the developer or programmer in charge. As it is a proprietary development, it can be 100% customised, but this does not guarantee that the interface is user-friendly, i.e. the ease of search, navigation, checkout and payment options may not be optimised (Lokke-Andersen, Wang, & Giacalone, 2022). In the case of social media, the platform is already designed, and the level of personalisation is low. But being an established platform, it can be guaranteed that the operation and interface to the buyer will be user-friendly, in the case of the purchase process and payment options, they have to be implemented outside the site. As the platform is not developed for e-commerce. In the case of a Marketplace, it is designed directly for online shopping. It is already optimised, its interface is tested, but there is no customisation, as only the products are loaded onto the platform. Table 5 shows the level of configuration for the user experience.

	Shopify	Facebook / Instagram	MercadoLibre	Amazon
User-friendly interface	Yes*	Yes	Yes	Yes
Configuration and customisation	Yes	No	No	No

Table 5 User experience*Personalisation and branding*

Personalisation is an important issue in sales strategy, branding, creation of offers, promotions and packages. In the first two options we can realise all available strategies. In the case of Marketplace, the only thing we can do is to indicate the brand of the product, but if it is only distributed or resold, it will not be possible to position the company's brand. Table 6 shows the level of customisation that exists in each category.

	Shopify	Facebook / Instagram	MercadoLibre	Amazon
Own brand positioning	Yes	Yes	No	No
Configuration and customisation	Yes	No	No	No
Creation of promotions	Yes	Yes	Limitado	Limitado
Creation of packages or bundles	Yes	Yes	Limitado	Limitado

Table 6 Personalisation and branding*Brand and reputation management*

As can be seen in table 7, there is a difference between brand management and reputational impact between channels. A good or bad review can positively or negatively affect positioning. A bad review would affect the reputation of the brand, regardless of the channel, but in the case of marketplaces, the problem can directly affect the ranking algorithm. When you have a bad review, a complaint, or a return, the Marketplace penalises you, and sometimes that penalty can affect to the point of stopping selling a product, or even affect the entire account (and stop selling all the products published). To maintain a good reputation, you have to maintain a low percentage of cancellations, complaints (any problem with the customer) or delays in shipping, because if you exceed the assigned percentage, your reputation will go down, and you will have less exposure (Li, Tadelis, & Zhou, 2020).

	Shopify	Facebook / Instagram	MercadoLibre	Amazon
Brand positioning	Yes*	Yes	No	No
Reputational impact	No	No	Yes	Yes

Table 7 Brand and reputation management**Discussion**

The comparison between the three e-commerce channels is crucial, since, depending on the size and needs of the company, one channel may be more profitable than another. According to the information gathered, it is possible to highlight the cost of implementation and the cost generated by the use of the platform, in the case of a Marketplace, the development cost is lower, as it is shared between the different sellers using the platform, compared to an online shop that the initial cost will be higher for the development of the site and infrastructure, in the case of the implementation in social networks the initial cost is low, and you can have control over the cost and brand management. In the long run, the cost may be better for social media and the online shop, as there will be no sales commissions or transaction fees, which is in line with Song B, indicating the differentiation between open source versus closed source platforms.

On the other hand, when a company offers products of different categories, a Marketplace can be an option, as they can be offered directly on the same platform, for the case of online shops or social networks they usually focus on a specific niche, offering their products to a specific group of buyers, where all products are usually focused on one category.

To provide a good user experience, Marketplaces are optimised, with a high level of development to support the platform and constant updates, but it can hinder navigation by having a large number of options. On the other hand, for online shops, you can have direct control over the design, but it requires high development and constant updating for site improvements, which can translate into a higher cost for constant development.

Brand positioning is a crucial point in deciding which channel would be appropriate, directly social media and online shops have a significant advantage for branding. A strong brand identity can be designed and managed. Compared to marketplace sellers, who may be limited in customising and differentiating their brand directly by marketplace policies.

For reputation management, in a Marketplace there are rules that can limit the reach of products directly by the platform's algorithm, for example, having poor service, complaints, shipping delays or cancellations could represent a significant drop in sales. But if there is good customer service and customer care management, the platform's algorithm can benefit in a greater reach for the products. However, one has to consider that there is a large number of sellers, who could offer a similar or even the same product. Where the main differentiator would be the price, and the quality of service. On the other hand, in an online shop or on social media, they have direct control over reputation management.

Conclusions

Based on the detailed comparison of the three e-commerce channels: online shop, social media and Marketplace, we can come to the following conclusions:

Indicator	Conclusions
Implementation and operating costs	Online shops and social media offer higher profitability in the long term, as they do not involve sales commissions or transaction fees. In the short term, social media has a low upfront cost, but online shops can offer greater personalisation and control over the brand.
Variety and scope of products	For companies offering a variety of products in different categories, a Marketplace can be a viable option, as it allows multiple categories to be sold on one platform.
User experience	Social media can offer a familiar and convenient user experience, but personalisation and optimisation for online sales can be limited. Online shops allow for greater personalisation, but require constant development to maintain an optimal user experience. Marketplaces are optimised for online sales, but the user experience can be affected by the large number of options available.
Brand positioning and reputation	Online shops and social media offer greater control over brand positioning and reputation management. In marketplaces, reputation can be significantly affected by platform policies, but proper management can result in greater reach for products.

Recommendations

1. Assess the company's needs: Before deciding on a channel, companies should assess their needs, budget and short- and long-term objectives. Each channel has its advantages and disadvantages, and the choice should be aligned with the company's business objectives.
2. Consider a multi-channel strategy: To maximise exposure and reach different market segments, some companies may consider a multi-channel strategy. For example, have an online shop for specific products and use social media for promotions to reach a wider audience.

3. Prioritise user experience: Regardless of the channel chosen, user experience should be a priority. Businesses should ensure that customers have an easy and pleasant shopping experience, regardless of whether they are shopping in an online shop, through social media or in a marketplace.

Ultimately, the choice of e-commerce channel will depend on each company's objectives. By making informed decisions and continuously adapting to market demands, small and medium-sized businesses can make the most of the opportunities offered by e-commerce in today's digital world.

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