

An analysis of Cambodia's e-commerce and way forward

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Received 28 June 2022
Revised 26 July 2022
Accepted 01 September 2022

Citation: Chan, R. (2022). An analysis of Cambodia's e-commerce and way forward. *Journal of Management, Economics, and Industrial Organization*, 6(3), 88-100.
<http://doi.org/10.31039/jomeino.2022.6.3.6>



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Abstract

This study aims to explore Cambodia's e-commerce before and during the pandemic and provide recommendations as a way forward, by consulting with the government's and international organizations' secondary data. It is found that e-commerce in Cambodia has just surged in the last few years mainly due to the diffusion of technology and mobile internet. This comes in tandem with the outbreak of the world pandemic when traveling has been restricted making online shopping a new experience. Thanks to the young population, vast internet use and private investments, they all contribute to the recent development. However, there are barriers that hampered the growth emanating from insufficient rules and regulations, the lack of consumers' trust, and the low digital literacy rate. Therefore, it needs involvement from government bodies to promote digital competency, strengthen online security, and support innovation and start-up. Moreover, entrepreneurs should partake in this journey by registering their online business, forming associations, adopting the local language on online platforms and investing more in digital infrastructure.

Keywords: E-commerce, Online business, COVID-19, Cambodia's economy.

JEL Classification Codes: L11, M20, M38.

1. Introduction

Since the civil war ended, Cambodia has rehabilitated and maintained robust economic growth of approximately 7% annually, except during the pandemic (The World Bank, 2021a). This stability uplifted Cambodia to be a lower-middle-income country in 2015, and it was contributed largely by the commitment and strong social and economic policy of the government and its citizens. Nevertheless, the Royal Government of Cambodia has, in its National Strategic Development Plan (2019-2023), set out the objectives to be a middle-income and high-income country by 2030 and 2050 respectively. To achieve those targets, prioritizing human resource development, and economic diversification, are among the core components of the national strategy. Despite the shock caused by the world pandemic, Cambodia's economy recovers quickly achieving around 2% growth in 2021 and is expected to regain around 4% growth in the following years, as predicted by the Asia Development Bank (2021). And this has to rely much on digital platforms and innovation, particularly e-commerce.

Even though there are possibilities for e-commerce to grow, Cambodia's market is still small and lacks behind its neighbours. In spite of a sharp increase in internet users in recent years, the percentage of online shoppers is only 8% (Hale, 2016). Regarding the e-commerce index, Cambodia is ranked 117 among 152 countries just above Myanmar in the Southeast Asia region and lagged far behind its neighbour Thailand (42) and Vietnam (63) (UNCTAD, 2019). In addition, the market activities of this industry are found active only in the capital city while the other parts of the country are left behind. As can be seen, many online businesses in the country just rely on social media to channel their products which is not a complete function of e-commerce. According to the minister of the Ministry of Economics and Finance statement, Cambodia needs at least another decade to transform herself into a technology-driven economy and it is needed to build fundamental technology infrastructure in the country (Hor, 2019).

From the early presentation, it shows the grey area of e-commerce development in Cambodia. To understand the issues in-depth and to shed more light on the topic, this digest aims to fulfil these objectives:

- to understand the situation of e-commerce in Cambodia during the pandemic;
- to analyze the underlying barriers of e-commerce in Cambodia;
- to give valid recommendations to relevant stakeholders.

The following section begins with an overview of Cambodia's e-commerce in general, followed by the changes during the pandemic, opportunities and challenges. This digest ends with recommendations for the government and entrepreneurs.

2. Research Method

This digest applies desk review on Cambodia's e-commerce and relied on secondary data for analysis by consulting with government and international organization reports, journal articles, newspapers and related online database.

3. Findings

3.1. An Overview of Cambodia's E-commerce

The term e-commerce, electronic commerce, or interchangeably termed as e-business, has been used to refer to business transfer or trading among households, individuals or other private and public entities on the internet (Babenko & Syniavska, 2018). This practice can be taken place in different types such as Business to Business (B2B), Business to Customers (B2C), Customers to Customers (C2C), or Customer to Business (C2B). Moreover, e-commerce can also be comprehended in two contexts, one of which is “if any part of a sales or trade transaction occurs through computer-mediation”, or the other narrow sense is “if all parts of a sales or trade transaction occur through computer-mediation” (MangoTango Asia, 2017).

To date, this interaction can be made on smartphones, tablets and computers through the practice of online shopping, digital banking, or buying stocks. In Cambodia, the practice appears in online market sites, e-payment, and other online bookings. Thanks to the fast and cheap internet connection, it has made people access online business from every corner of the country. In addition, the young and dynamic population, as half of the whole population is under 30 years old (MoP, 2019), has contributed largely to the widespread of mobile and internet use. As shown by the Telecom Regulator Cambodia, mobile subscribers in Cambodia are around 21 million in this early quarter of 2021 (from 5 million in 2004), and mobile internet users almost reach 18 million in the same period (Telecommunication Regulator Cambodia, 2021). More importantly, the penetration of mobile internet in Cambodia is not only remarkably fast, but the cost is also one of the cheapest in the world (MangoTango Asia, 2017). With this enabling environment, it has made a promising view on the development of e-commerce in Cambodia in the next few years.

Cambodia can develop digital infrastructure to support the growth of e-commerce through public and private partnerships. For instance, the telecom sector is showing promising growth as more giant firms are entering the market. In 2019, a Chinese-owned company SEATEL has invested US\$300 million to develop fiber optic cable under the Belt and Road initiative of the Chinese government (Chan, 2019). Another Chinese conglomerate-Huawei, in March 2019, signed with the Royal Government of Cambodia and later with Smart Axiata to bring 5G mobile network technology to the country (Prak, 2019), as one of the first countries in Southeast Asia. Even though

the project has been delayed for a while because of the pandemic, it is expected to resume very soon once the situation becomes better.

3.2. The Change of Business Platforms Brought by E-commerce

The arrival of electronic commerce in Cambodia has opened up the business image in the kingdom. It cannot be denied that e-commerce has offered many benefits compared to traditional business as regards wider access at any time from any place. Up to now, many companies have entered this market and become successful, while others have not. One of the prominent buying and selling websites that have prospered until today is Khmer24 which began its journey in 2009 and received approximately 90,000 visitors monthly at that early time (ADB, 2018). A decade has passed and this website still keeps its momentum and has become one of the reliable virtual marketplaces. Meanwhile, there are also many recent entries of well-known companies, namely Decathlon, Bookmebus, Myspar, Little Fashion/L192, and Aeon. Several others, however, have joined and left since they could not compete with the oldies and adapt to a competitive environment. Those online businesses include, inter alia, Roserb, MAIO Mall, and Shop168.

Table 1: E-commerce activities in Cambodia

Company	Explanations	Remarks
Khmer24 (online marketplace)	Created in 2009, one of the biggest market sites in Cambodia.	July 2013: more than 70,000 users, 9,000,000 pages viewed per month
Little Fashion (online shopping site, fashion and other goods delivery)	Started Facebook commerce in 2010, selling apparel, and offering its own delivery-by-moto service. Expanded the business, selling other fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) in their mobile app, particularly during the lockdown in 2021.	2014: up to 50 deliveries a day of footwear, bags, accessories and beauty products also sold in brick-and-mortar stores. March 2019: another \$US 5 million group in, to launch a mobile application for online shopping -L192 June 2021: about US\$1.7 million Facebook likes.
Foodpanda (food and grocery delivery)	International company based in Germany; a food delivery giant; Started in Phnom Penh before expanding to Siem Reap, Battambang, Kampong Cham, Kampot, Kampong Thom, Kampong Som, Poipet, Banteay Meanchey, Pursat province, and Kampong Speu province	2019: entered Cambodia's market 2021: expanded to eleven provinces
Nham 24 (food and grocery delivery)	Launched in 2016; a local company; partnered with around 2000 restaurants.	

Source: Edited and adapted from ADB, 2018.

3.3. E-commerce during the Pandemic

While the outbreak of the world pandemic-Covid-19 is a great shock to the Cambodia market, it seems to be a silver lining for e-commerce. Many online businesses which were not successful prior to the great hit, have prospered during this period by attracting more customers and expanding their services. As a case in point, online food and grocery delivery services that did not generate much revenue before, when people can travel freely, have been set in motion and earned a large profit during the lockdown. Although there is no specific number of revenues generated by this sector, local interview with food deliver informs that they have earned up to US\$ 15-20 from their daily delivery during the curfew, which is relatively high compared to the average income of Cambodians (NIKKEI Asia, 2021). Foodpanda, one of the international food delivery companies operating in Southeast Asia, has gained its ground even stronger in the last two years. On the one hand, it has pressured many local brands through their big deal cooperation with local influencers and promotion. Local brands, namely Deuk, Flash, and Muuve delivery would be susceptible to close down if they cannot endure the competition for the time being. On the other hand, the arrival of such a giant international company can also strengthen local brands to be competitive and resilient. As proof, a local food delivery brand-Nham24 was reported in the news that their business experienced overwhelmed support during the Covid-19 period (Haider, 2021).

However, not all online business has benefited from the pandemic outbreak, other parts of e-commerce including the fashion industry-Little Fashion, Pedro and ZANDO online site-have not developed much within this period. The impact also shares with other sectors, especially (online) ride-hailing services that have lost as high as 40-45% of their customers, and they almost receive none when people are banned from traveling (NIKKEI Asia, 2021). Yet, the shift from their primary focus (on ride-hailing and selling clothes) to online food and grocery delivery could be the best solution done by Grab and Little Fashion, in which they have readjusted their business strategy by using their existing means. They even redesign and update their mobile application for customers to be able to order goods and groceries online, which pragmatically fits with the situation of the lockdown.

In short, the hard time during the pandemic has severely hit some of the online businesses partly due to the reduction of expenditure of customers, yet it has offered a great opportunity for other businesses to strengthen themselves and grow. E-commerce is expected to be recovered after this pandemic as many people are accustomed to this online service. According to Statista (2022), Cambodia's e-commerce would be able to generate revenue of around US\$1.1 billion in 2022 and it is expected to reach US\$1.78 billion by 2025.

3.4. The Barriers

Although e-commerce has shown its bright side in Cambodia market, it can be acknowledged that this sector has been challenged greatly, ranging from macro to micro levels. To present the barriers in this sector, the following review is done based on four factors which are law or regulation, economics, social and technology.

3.4.1. Law or Regulation

Albeit Cambodia's e-commerce law has been enacted since 2019, the implementation and understanding of it from online business owners seems very limited. Many online sellers are operating without registration or license, and this could be caused by many problems. One of the reasons is that those online businesses have not understood the benefits received from registration. Another problem is emanating from the lack of proper communication from the authority. In other words, the government has not advocated widely regarding the subsidy and protection that those online businesses and enterprises would gain from the registration. It is expected, however, that sooner or later the government of Cambodia has to strengthen its regulation of online business. To ensure effective tax collection, the government will not leave small and medium online business untouched as it is today, as this has made them lose a big part of tax revenue (Chea, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, the protection of online user data and privacy is one of the main concerns among consumers. Even though e-commerce law has been implemented, Cambodian cyberlaw is still in drafting (B2B Cambodia, 2021). The absence of such legal mechanisms has made people uncertain about how their data on online platforms are used. They do not know what to do once the problems occur, particularly hacking and data leaking. To some extent, this makes people less likely to perform online financial transactions. And without addressing this gap, the growth of e-commerce and other digital-related activities will remain sluggish.

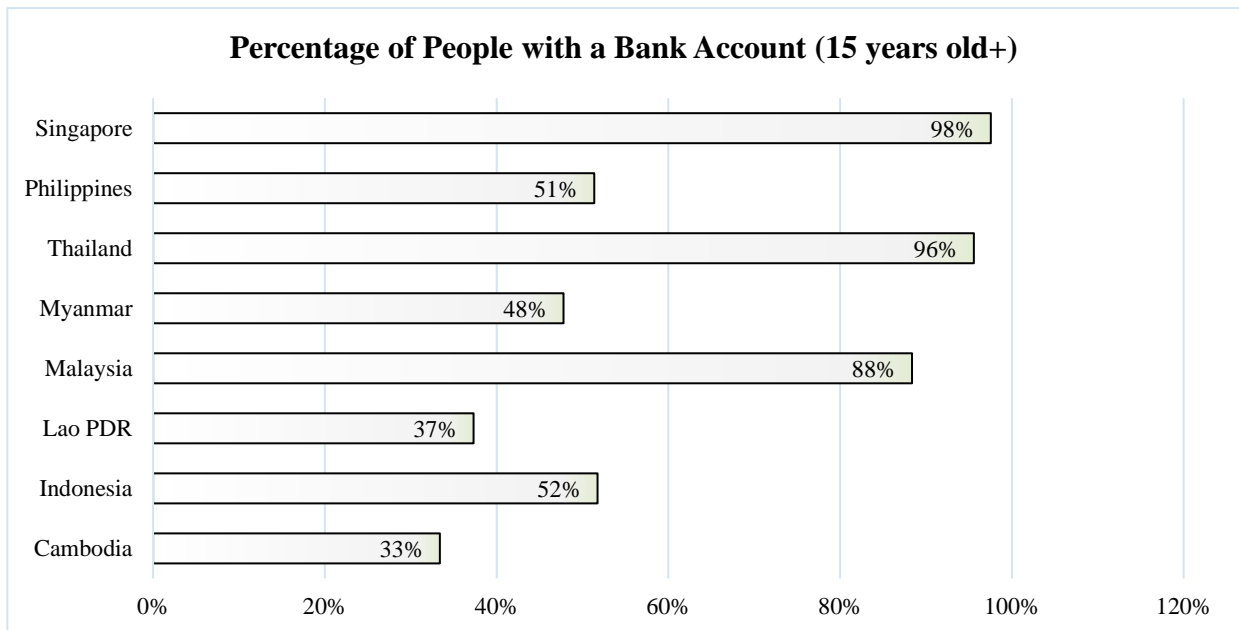
3.4.2. Economics

Having achieved robust economic growth for many decades and being promoted from a low-income country, Cambodia's economy, nevertheless, is still prone to external shocks. In 2020, the national economy has contracted for the first time in this century making many households challenged against income loss (The World Bank, 2022). Although the rise of the middle-income class recently has contributed a lot to business operations either online or onsite. Without any proper measures being made by the authority amidst and after this pandemic, their status would easily relapse to under the poverty line. In short, an intervention from the stakeholders, particularly

the government, is needed to reassure that the e-commerce sector would not be impacted in the aftermath.

Even though approximately 50% of Cambodians have experience with banking and other related financial services either a bank account, borrowing account, insurance, or electronic wallet, according to National Bank Cambodia (cited in Chan, 2019), other studies have proved that Cambodians shows their uncertainty towards financial institution, and digital banking in particular (Chan & Ngorn, 2021; MangoTango Asia, 2017). Albeit the middle-income class has expanded recently, Cambodians who have registered their bank account are still finite. According to the Global Findex of the World Bank in 2021, the proportion of Cambodians that are over 15 years old with a bank account (individual or with someone else) was only 33.39%. It is much lower than its counterparts, Thailand (95.58%) and Malaysia (88.37%) (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2022). A report by UNCTAD (2017) illustrates that while the percentage of Cambodians who own an account is relatively low, those who have access to credit cards are even more limited which are approximately 39,000 only in 2017. For daily use, it is found that the majority of local people would prefer to keep their cash with them which, as a consequence, makes it lose velocity and interest. If that practice cannot be changed somewhat now, it would impede the success of e-commerce as a whole. It is known that to develop online business, e-banking plays a very essential role as a complementary, and it works as the vein for all financial transactions.

Figure 1: The percentage of people with a bank account in Southeast Asia (15 years old+)



Source: The World Bank (2021b).

3.4.3. Social

Online shopping behavior also plays a role in boosting e-commerce. If buying and selling on-site are still consumers' routine, there is less likely that e-business can gain ground. Even though there is a dearth of studies proving consumers' behavior in Cambodia, it is commonly seen that old people prefer buying things at the market. A study by the Centre for Policy Studies with 225 people found that trust in digital platforms is still a public concern worrying about being cheated and experiencing counterfeit news and online fraud (Chan & Ngorn, 2021). Moreover, this is caused by previous bad experiences since many users commonly received unsatisfied products when ordering online. Rather, it is better for them to go to the store despite knowing that it takes more time and cost.

Another issue that contributes to low trading among consumers is because of the small variety of products available online. There are not many online stores being operated in Cambodia. As suggested in the early part, a myriad of small businesses is using social media such as Facebook and Instagram to sell their products which does not fully reflect electronic commerce. Moreover, a large segment of online businesses in Cambodia are being dominated by foreign corporates such as Alibaba, Amazon, and Taobao, just to mention a few. These international online marketplaces can provide a myriad of products with competitive prices to the local shops that normally overcharge or make extra profit on importing goods. Even though those international e-business earned popularity in the Cambodian market not long ago, it would not be a good sign for the local economy in the long run, which ends up making the cash outflow to other countries.

3.4.4. Technology

Another obstacle that hampered the progress of Cambodia's e-commerce is the lack of digital literacy. Despite the growth of local people accessing smartphone and the internet (Telecommunication Regulator Cambodia, 2021), the challenge still remains concerning that people cannot extract all the benefits from new technologies. Daily use of smartphone among local Cambodians are mostly for entertainment but not for financial transaction or e-banking. A study has shown that there is no significant difference among ASEAN member states in terms of digital literacy, yet Cambodia is ranked eighth while Laos and Brunei are excluded (Kusumastuti & Nuryani, 2020). As a future plan, the Royal Government of Cambodia has already strategized its plan by implementing Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework 2021-2035 aiming to foster digital citizens government and business.

Another issue is that there are limited digital content and online applications available in the local language-Khmer. This would be a big barrier for elders and others who cannot read and write other languages. This does not necessarily imply only the online marketplaces or websites, but also

mobile applications, and users' terms and conditions which are normally written in English only. Without considering this, or by targeting only young urban youths, a large segment of the online market will be faded away. In addition, this barrier would not only challenge the consumers but also the service providers. To illustrate, a deliver, who is technology and language illiterate, meaning that he or she cannot process the online booking, or respond to customers online, would lose a great deal of opportunities to earn and access to the digital market. The same is true for street vendors who do not know how to link their products to customers at home.

4. Discussions and Keys for Breakthrough

4.1. Recommendations to the Government

To develop digital economy, particularly e-commerce, Cambodia should begin by fostering digital literacy. Many groups of people in Cambodia are reported to be digital illiterate and cannot function advanced activities that are the means to access e-commerce (UNDP, 2020). By providing training from the early stage, such as the integration of digital lessons in secondary and high school, and other virtual training, could raise public's awareness of online platform. Home to home digital outreach programs in rural areas could also be a choice to assist all citizens in remote areas to make use of their mobile internet and access to a wider market online. It is believed that once people understand the benefits of it-e-commerce, their propensity to embrace such innovation will be higher (Pavlou, 2003). In the end, it will offer inclusive benefits, as the case of a delivery man using digital booking app, mentioned earlier.

In addition, to promote digital use among the public, the authority has to strengthen the control of user privacy, and data. The government has to reassure all online transactions are free from possible risks. New law and regulation have to be revised and updated to follow the development of the digital world. There should also be a specific government unit that regulates all online commercialization, websites, and users' data. By this, authorities can impose effective measures or mechanisms dealing with online scamming, hacking, and other frauds in no time. More or less, if such activities can be achieved, people's trust would be gained and online transactions would become a new practice for many consumers.

To foster e-commerce in Cambodia, the future may rest upon the young generation; thus, it needs involvement from the government to support innovations through establishing digital competitions, hackathons, technology camps and start-up incubators that would hatch new business ideas aligning with the existing digital economic plan. The progress of the Battle of Mind competition, Techno Start-Up, and Khmer Enterprise in Cambodia are a few cases that the government should keep their momentum. For their sustainability, it also requires a large sum of grants and other

subsidies from the authority and relevant stakeholders, given the success of e-commerce is determined by the success of these micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

4.2. Recommendations to Entrepreneurs

Local entrepreneurs should have awareness to register their businesses. Although previous traditional family businesses could make them get rid of tax obligations, a registered business makes them protected by the law and supported by subsidies or grants in any economic shock. And it would also allow the government to take full control and strategize the development plan.

To compete with the international online business, local enterprises or firms should collaborate and bind together as associations. To date, a large segment of the market has been taken by international companies that are based outside Cambodia, namely AliExpress, Amazon and Taobao. If local firms can handle this market share, they will not only prevent the cash outflow to foreign countries but also strengthen local companies in the future.

More digital platforms such as online marketplace, e-wallet, and mobile application- should be created and translated into Khmer language for the ease of use. The EF English proficiency index (2021) indicates that Cambodia is ranked 97 over 112 countries indicating that the local people have a very low English proficiency. Making more application available in local language would not only offer the pride of Khmer, but also provides inclusive development to its citizens. For instance, people in rural areas would ripe the benefits from this initiation and be able to register mobile banking or experience online shopping. Small vendors also have a chance to integrate their business online with a familiar language.

In addition, there should be a big call for local entrepreneurs to invest in digital infrastructure. It is acknowledged that e-commerce would prosper only if there are sufficient supporting systems, namely wide and stable internet coverage and well-established e-banking. Local firms should consider expanding the fintech industry which includes e-payment that complements the growth of e-commerce. Pi Pay and Wing are good examples of e-wallet, and ABA mobile application could also be the role model for others to follow. Eventually, the investment in this industry would complement to one another and widen the online business opportunity in the kingdom.

5. Conclusions

The Royal Government of Cambodia's endeavor to develop e-commerce is not an easy journey. While there are many potential factors such as young population, fast digital diffusions and large investment in digital infrastructure, many barriers still exist ranging from law, economics, social and technology aspects. To harness such barriers, the government, entrepreneurs and other stakeholders must collaborate together. Local authorities must focus on three main aspects, namely

promoting digital literacy among its citizen, fostering digital innovations including digital start-ups, and strengthening e-commerce and cyber law. Moreover, the entrepreneurs must play a crucial role by registering their business, forming as local associations, establishing users' friendly apps in Khmer language, and investing more in digital infrastructure. If these recommendations could be achieved, the future of Cambodia e-commerce will triumph and surpass its counterparts in the region.

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