

DETERMINING THE CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS OF E-COMMERCE IN UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Critical Success Factors in e-commerce in Uzbekistan. First, the most essential variables are identified through a literature review. Then, experts in the Uzbekistan e-commerce industry evaluate each potential success factor via factor analysis. The research findings shed light on the most critical factors related to e-commerce in the IT sector, and the e-commerce industry is in the growth stage. An unexpected finding is that the human resources accent is typically emphasized in more developing countries. There are also IT-related variables that, if adequately addressed, will help secure customers. A qualitative part of the research makes an important finding that hinders e-commerce development. In particular, responsible institutions are recommended to revisit their counterfeit products policies. The paper serves as a guide for Uzbekistan e-commerce entities. Besides its practical value, the study contributes to the literature by enlarging the research body of critical success factors among developing countries.

Keywords: Critical Success Factors; e-commerce; developing countries; strategic management

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INTRODUCTION

With explosive e-commerce growth, comprising 5.2 trillion U.S. dollars worldwide in 2021 (Chevalier, 2022), strategic management aims to implement the best practices, defined as Critical Success Factors (Sung, 2006). However, Critical Success Factors might differ from context to context and from culture to culture as the growing research debate on e-commerce performance varies across nations. Prior studies have tended to polarize East to West (Sung, 2006) or developed countries to developing ones (Laosethakul & Boulton, 2007). The differences have been underpinned by cultural peculiarities (Sung, 2006), consumer behavior, and infrastructure development (Laosethakul & Boulton, 2007). The exploration of undeveloped markets in terms of e-commerce with

rapid growth potential has created a particular case.

Uzbekistan is a developing country located in the heart of Central Asia. Beginning in 2018, several steps were taken to spur the growth of e-commerce in the country. First, the government of Uzbekistan signed the decree "On measures for the accelerated development of e-commerce" and approved the "Program for the Development of E-commerce in Uzbekistan for 2018-2021". Second, in 2019, COVID-19 further advanced e-commerce adoption from the client side, as the Uzbek population found it unusual to shop online. Third, in 2022, the massive relocation of IT specialists to Uzbekistan because of the Russian-Ukrainian war is expected to contribute to the development of e-commerce. According to the local business site Spot.uz (2022), about 6,000 IT specialists

relocated to Uzbekistan from February 2022 to September 2022. The mass migration of Russian and Ukrainian human capital with a representation skewed toward IT specialists seeking employment adds uniqueness to this context. It also should be mentioned that COVID-19 triggered households to change their purchasing patterns, which created massive potential for e-commerce worldwide (UNCTAD, 2021: a), including in developing countries like Uzbekistan.

As can be seen, the growing importance of e-commerce is amplified due to the changing lifestyle of people who seek comfort in obtaining products and ordering services. At the moment, however, a prominent market player to expedite e-commerce usage and provide online services to people has yet to emerge. According to an informal interview with a local marketing research agency, the vast Chinese e-commerce giant Aliexpress is planning to enter the Uzbekistan market. After careful market analysis, a local marketplace, UZUM, was launched in October 2022 to play a proactive role. UZUM intends to integrate its banking service where customers can order debit cards. The idea is to enable customers to combine online shopping and normal banking operations, e.g., money transfer, in one application. The current rapidly developing context raises interest in studying the critical success factors specific for a context that is in the development stage but has a high potential for rapid growth.

E-commerce capability in Uzbekistan

According to the World Bank (2021:a), approximately 77% of Uzbekistan's population uses the Internet even though around 50% live in rural areas (World Bank, 2021:b). Uzbekistan is ranked 85th in speed and performance of Internet connection in fixed broadband and 107th in mobile (Speedtest, 2023).

Interestingly, after a brief look at developing countries' Internet profiles, Uzbekistan looks rather promising. For comparison, only 39% of individuals in Bangladesh use the Internet, 21% in Pakistan, 46% in India, and 21% and 18% in neighboring Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, respectively (World Bank, 2021:a). In regard to e-commerce, the World Bank has identified four indicators related to online shopping: account ownership; share of individuals using the Internet; postal reliability; and secure Internet servers (World Bank, 2021:c).

But in terms of how e-commerce in Uzbekistan compares to other countries, according to UNCTAD (2021:b), Uzbekistan lost 8.4 points and moved from a rank of 94 in 2019 to 107 out of 152 countries in 2020 in B2C e-commerce ratings. Among the reasons for this

drop in ranking were underdeveloped regulations and e-commerce culture, cybersecurity, the population's digital illiteracy, internet penetration, and general infrastructure (USAID, 2022).

According to Whitley (1994), government support can be a driving force in introducing changes to an existing company or launching a new venture. With that in mind, and to build more trust in e-commerce, the Uzbekistan government has developed incentives to stimulate it; for example, IT companies were freed from paying a fixed tax (Lex. uz, 2020). Also, through Presidential Decree UP-5099, the Technological Park was opened in 2019 to create a favorable environment for developing IT products.

The literature is inconclusive regarding a one-fits-all approach to what determines a company's success. One school of thought argues that different institutional environments predetermine a business' operational characteristics, structures, and practices. To elaborate, national institutions in East Asia form unique relationships within the business environment, which is distinct from what can be observed in Europe. The key performance indicators vary significantly from nation to nation (Whitley, 1994), and what can be achieved in one institutional context might be different in a different setting (Hoskisson et al., 1999).

Such a predetermined business operation scenario based on a national profile is shared by Haake (2002) with his Individualistic versus Communitarian business systems, which reflected Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions. For example, in an individualistic business system, cooperation between firms and the relationship between banks and the government is limited. Opposing this view is a resource-based view or the internal capability of a company (Wernerfelt, 1984), e.g., human capital, leadership, etc. In contrast, a Critical Success Factors framework gives a more all-embracing view of a company's capability and fit within an industry, including internal and external environmental analyses.

Previous studies tend to conclude that the success factors of developing countries do not coincide with developed ones. Meanwhile, as can be seen in Uzbekistan's case, it demonstrates some features not specific to developing countries, thus making this country attractive for investment and research accordingly. Defining the Critical Success Factors for e-commerce development in Uzbekistan will be informative if the extant research resonates with the real world. This study, therefore, is aimed to either confirm or reject a classic separation into East and West and into developing and developed countries. Its theoretical contribution is to argue with a familiar classification with an example of Uzbekistan. The paper also has the practical value of providing up-to-date support for Uzbekistan entrepreneurs.

The literature review that follows was conducted concerning different countries in order to map a big picture of e-commerce CSFs in developing countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research has created a large pool of antecedents and hindrances to e-commerce success. Below is an overview of these variables in developing countries that will help formulate Critical Success Factors in e-commerce.

E-commerce success catalysts

The importance of globalization, the open source movement, and large corporations' e-commercialization as role models for SMEs are among the main factors affecting e-commerce adoption, as found by Alamro and Tarawneh (2011) in Jordan. In their assessment of electronic business implementation precursors, the findings of Migdadi et al. (2016) evidenced a significant interrelationship between organizational learning capabilities and e-commerce implementation. Thus, companies that pay crucial attention to e-business training availability, IT expertise, and the technical knowledge level of their employees are predetermined for successful electronic commerce performance.

Zhang and Okoroafo (2014) identified five factors that lead to success in e-commerce: IT capability; security and trust (avoiding online fraud); government support (creating a favorable environment); market orientation; and knowledge acquisition (about customers, competitors, and opportunities to go global).

Sharma and Aggarwal (2019) identified the determinants of e-commerce success in India. The first group of factors is website service quality (navigation, design, usability), but they also listed trust and privacy in this section, along with 24-hour availability, page loading speed, attractiveness and readability of the content, as well as proper display and the up-to-datedness of the products. This category represents the customer support system, including different forms of payment, tracking order status, and the 'Frequently Asked Questions' section. Personalization followed a popular answer among the respondents in their study, which means proposing products based on previous customer shopping patterns. They also introduced the term 'electronic word of mouth', which refers to advertisements and electronic feedback left by customers (Sharma and Aggarwal, 2019).

Awa et al. (2015) studied the demographic determinants of e-commerce adoption in Nigeria and revealed that the age of the top executives of a company plays a vital role in the tendency to adopt e-commerce; the younger the executive, the higher the

propensity to deploy e-commerce. Another crucial variable was the CEO's ICT-related experience, and a gender difference was also found to be statistically significant; males have a positive relationship with e-commerce adoption. There was also a statistical correlation between e-commerce adoption and education. Higher education provides more chances for e-business implementation. The last determinant was experience. The research indicated that the likelihood of e-commerce adoption is higher when the working experience of top management is at least five years.

Li et al. (2020) noted that talent capability significantly influences market capitalization and operational adjustment agility. Human capital here is presumed to analyze customer preferences, respond to turbulent business environment changes quickly and professionally, design e-business strategies, and create unique selling proposals. The following hypothesis tested a managerial role: Management stimulates e-commerce facilitation, including necessary professional training. Finally, technical capability tends to accelerate external business performance. However, it was noted that the influence on the internal performance hypothesis was not supported due to country-specific agricultural business in China, but it might be applicable to other businesses and/or regions.

Khan et al. (2019) conducted research in Pakistan, finding that e-service quality is essential in evaluating e-customer satisfaction and e-customer loyalty. E-service quality in their study included efficiency (related to website user-friendliness), system availability (page response time, request execution), fulfillment (no difference between expectations and reality regarding the time of delivery, products availability, and product return), privacy/security (protection of customer data).

Developing versus Developed

In contrast to developing countries, respondents in France talking about e-commerce prioritized ergonomics and website design. Paris consumers reported they want to find the same prices online as offline, including special offers. The French are sensitive to couriers's greetings, friendliness, and readiness to substitute delivered products. Interviewed users stated that synergy between on- and offline databases for loyalty cards, gifts, and personalized discounts on frequently purchased products is essential.

A study in Poland by Gajewska et al. (2019), investigating customer satisfaction with the quality of e-commerce services concluded that the most important factor is reliability (timeliness of delivery,

time to respond to a complaint, update on delays, relevant expertise). The next component of a customer's overall impression is tangibility (readability of the web page, quality/price ratio, response time to request, and company promotion). The service's reactivity was ranked third and is comprised of updates on delivery time, fast customer service, and quick reaction to customers' needs and queries. Guarantee/safety united under one umbrella of staff professionalism, security, and trust in the transaction is the next item, with the empathy dimension - individual treatment and thoughtful staff - being the last.

Although even a brief review of the literature on e-commerce gives evidence that developing countries prioritize different items and face problems of a different nature, Laosethakul and Boulton (2007) reported that the main reason for e-commerce failure in developing countries is because they mirrored e-commerce business models from developed countries.

E-commerce success inhibitors

To help strategic managers, some researchers have paid attention to problem areas that, if adequately addressed, can lead to success. For example, according to the findings by Taylor and Owusu (2012), the factors that hindered e-commerce adoption in Ghana were poor Internet connectivity and limited Internet Service Providers (ISP), lack of online payment process, pricing structures, limited availability of online banking services, power failure, and low competition in the industry.

A study in Thailand shared similar findings, e.g., poor IT infrastructure plus an untrustworthy e-legal structure and payment system. Customers do not want to disclose their credit cards, and consumers are used

to seeing and touching the products before purchasing, which e-commerce has made impossible (Laosethakul & Boulton, 2007).

As can be seen from Table 1, some of the factors have been proven to be important in many studies. Meanwhile, the data about Uzbekistan is scarce.

The electrification of services in Uzbekistan needs to catch up with those in developed countries. The initial stage of e-services, which had consecutive problems, demotivates citizens to give preference to electronic services. Rakhmanov (2009) emphasized that Uzbekistan needs laws and regulations regarding e-payment and privacy to protect personal data. He also highlighted the lack of qualified IT staff, which is reflected in the difficulty of the service. Slow Internet speed and instability of the Internet connection, poor Internet penetration in the regions of Uzbekistan, and computer illiteracy contributed to citizens' reluctance to engage in e-services. Among the other barriers was a lack of information about websites and applications' existence, lack of trust, and incurred cost of service use. There were also cultural aspects such as contact networks and preference to visit the service physically. Most websites were also introduced in Russian rather than either English or Uzbek, which raised the issue of the multilingualism availability of the represented services (Rakhmanov, 2009).

Table 1. The summary of the prior research on E-commerce Key Success Factors

Quality of service (timeliness) (Colla and Lapoule,2012; Gajewska et al,2019; Khan et al,2019)
Internet connection (Rakhmanov, 2009; Taylor and Owusu,2012; Sharma and Aggarwal,2019)
IT expertise (Laosethakul and Boulton, 2007; Rakhmanov, 2009; Zhang and Okoroafo, 2014; Migdadi et al., 2016; Li et al.,2020)
Knowledge acquisition (about customers, competitors) (Zhang and Okoroafo, 2014; Migdadi et al., 2016; Li et al.,2020)
Promotion/advertisement (Rakhmanov, 2009; Sharma and Aggarwal,2019; Gajewska et al, 2019)
Electronic word of mouth (Sharma and Aggarwal,2019)
Security and trust (Rakhmanov, 2009; Zhang and Okoroafo, 2014; Sharma and Aggarwal,2019; Gajewska et al,2019; Khan et al,2019)
Price positioning (Rakhmanov, 2009; Colla and Lapoule,2012; Taylor and Owusu,2012; Gajewska et al, 2019)
Top management support (Migdadi et al., 2016; Li et al.,2020)
Learning capabilities (Migdadi et al., 2016; Li et al.,2020)
Large corporations role-modelling (Alamro and Tarawneh,2011)
Country-specific business plan (Laosethakul and Boulton,2007; Li et al.,2020)
Multilinguality of a platform (Rakhmanov, 2009)
Demographic profile of top management (Awa et al, 2015)
Customer Support System (Sharma and Aggarwal,2019; Gajewska et al,2019)
Cultural aspect (Laosethakul and Boulton,2007; Rakhmanov, 2009)
Competition (Taylor and Owusu,2012)
Various payment services (Taylor and Owusu,2012)
Personalisation (Colla and Lapoule,2012; Sharma and Aggarwal,2019)
Government support (Zhang and Okoroafo, 2014)
Website/application design and ergonomics(Colla and Lapoule,2012; Sharma and Aggarwal,2019; Gajewska et al,2019; Khan et al,2019)

Source: First author's work

It should be noted that the findings noted above were published over a decade ago. Since then, some

government programs have been introduced to support the country's IT development. Internet speed

and penetration are currently more competitive than in other developing countries. This, plus the relocation of IT professionals caused by the Ukraine War, makes Uzbekistan a plausible research venue.

Considering the arguments mentioned above, there is some ground to predict a probable distinction between findings about Uzbekistan's experience with e-commerce and the existing body of research in developing countries.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The head of the Uzbekistan e-commerce association shared contacts of people who could qualify to fill out the survey used in this study, and the respondents were contacted through Telegram social media platforms and e-mails.

A purposive sampling technique that identified experienced top professionals in the sphere of e-commerce was used in this research. According to Creswell & Plano Clark (2011), proficiency and being well-informed about a phenomenon of interest is essential for purposive sampling. Considering the limitations of management studies involving only top managers (Newbert, 2008; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2009), it was decided to survey middle managers instead. Plus, if the enterprise is of medium size (50-249 employees), multiple respondents within the firm were approached to share their opinions in a questionnaire.

The research sample consisted of pure play (Internet only) and bricks-and-clicks (Internet as a new market channel). As claimed by Feindt et al. (2002), all companies involved in e-commerce share the same Critical Success Factors when it comes to interaction with customers in the web space. So in this case the industry does not introduce a significant difference. Furthermore, e-commerce still needs to be well-developed in Uzbekistan to assess industry-specific competitiveness.

Research tool

Initially, in-depth interviews were planned to be conducted with the e-commerce representatives. The rationale was predetermined by a relatively small population and a willingness to find something specific to contribute to the literature. However, the data collection period fell in mid-December and January, traditionally connected with New Year preparations and celebrations. This made it hard to arrange meetings with the participants. While the questionnaire alternative was not more accessible in such a case, it at least allowed the respondents some time to maneuver.

The questionnaire design

The variables contributing to e-commerce success were derived from the extant literature. Content validity was achieved by carefully eliciting items to measure. Face validity was attained through the inspection of the questionnaire by a team of 3 academics.

Second, the list of operational dimensions from the literature was consolidated into conceptual dimensions to make the questionnaire look structured and well-organized. For instance, the section on web factors included questions on content personalization, convenience of usage, privacy of customers, social media integration, diverse payment methods, and security of payment. Strategic factors were prompted to know the importance of online and offline strategies, specific business plans (localization), supply chain ownership, partnership, and points of distinction.

The first part of the questionnaire, designed in Google Forms, asked the respondents to rate the potential success factor using a 5-point Likert scale. Each respondent assessed all possible critical success factors of e-commerce and showed the importance level of each factor, where 1 indicated being not important, and 5 very important. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of the demographic profile of the participants. The last question was open-ended, and the participants were invited to share their commentaries on the questions answered and other relevant thoughts.

A piloting study was conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. Eleven middle-level managers of e-commerce companies took part.

Respondents in the English language filled out the survey due to their adequate proficiency level. Meanwhile, some comments were received on improving the questionnaire items. The first and foremost comment was that the questions could be better addressed if asked in Russian than in English.

After collecting all the comments from a pilot study, the team of 3 academics and 1 practitioner from the e-commerce field addressed the questionnaire to modify the items. All 3 academics are active researchers in the Business Management and Marketing subject areas and lecturers in international universities having proficiency in the English language. Two out of three also have Russian as their native language. One obtained her bachelor's degree in linguistics. The bilingual field expert played the role of a 'bridge' between the literature terminology in the academic world and the vocabulary in the practitioners' world. As a result, the reliability of the translation was ensured by both field and language competencies.

Data collection

Around 60 successful e-commerce representatives were contacted by the researchers from the list provided by the Uzbekistan e-commerce association. 50 responses were obtained, which comprises an 83% response rate. There was an interesting observation within the research that when approaching a contact via his/her personal messenger (in this study, it was Telegram), the reply was received almost immediately; in contrast, many e-mails remained unanswered.

Data analysis

The quantitative part was done through Factor Analysis in R software to elicit the most outstanding factors. The respondents' commentaries were analyzed as a qualitative contribution and are discussed below.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic profile

76% of the respondents are male, and 24% are female. The participants' age range varies from 20 to 52 years old. The mean is 32 years.

56% of them occupy managerial positions, 16% are marketologists, and 8% are IT specialists. Some responses stated broad 'e-commerce' with no specific occupation; some misinterpreted the question and mentioned their field of work, e.g., the food industry, or replied that they are entrepreneurs. Although the study did not aim to survey the CEO, it automatically happened in several cases (12%) since the business was small and no other employees were fully aware of the business operation details.

Among the respondents, 62% obtained a bachelor's degree, 32% possess a master's degree, 4% received a Doctoral degree, and 2% have specialized education (college/lyceum).

As for experience in e-commerce, the results are as follows: 74% have worked in this field for less than five

years, 22% of respondents have 5-10 years of experience, and 4% have more than ten years of experience in the industry.

Due to full anonymity, the companies' names are not mentioned, although the respondents were asked this question for relevance check. An interesting detail is that at least two answers mentioned three or more businesses they work for as consultants or HR specialists. This means that business-wise, there are more responses than registered in a survey, which brings more reliability.

Factor Analysis

R software was utilized to run Factor Analysis. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study of its kind to implement Factor Analysis to define Critical Success Factors.

Note: The term factor was used in a literature review referring to the variables now analyzed to explore the latent factors that combine seemingly unrelated variables to structure the data, like how symptoms can help diagnose an illness.

Factor analysis was carried out to find fewer variables by optimizing the large list of items. Such a method helps determine the most/prominent issues. This analysis is used in policymaking to set priorities (Günay et al., 2021).

- First, the data was transferred into an Excel file, and the questions were coded for more straightforward navigation.
- Second, the factorability of the data frame was checked via Bartlett's test. A small value of $3.783008e-68$ (< 0.05) of the significance level indicates that factor analysis applies to this data.
- Third, several tests (Scree Plot and Parallel analysis) suggested that the number of factors is 2.

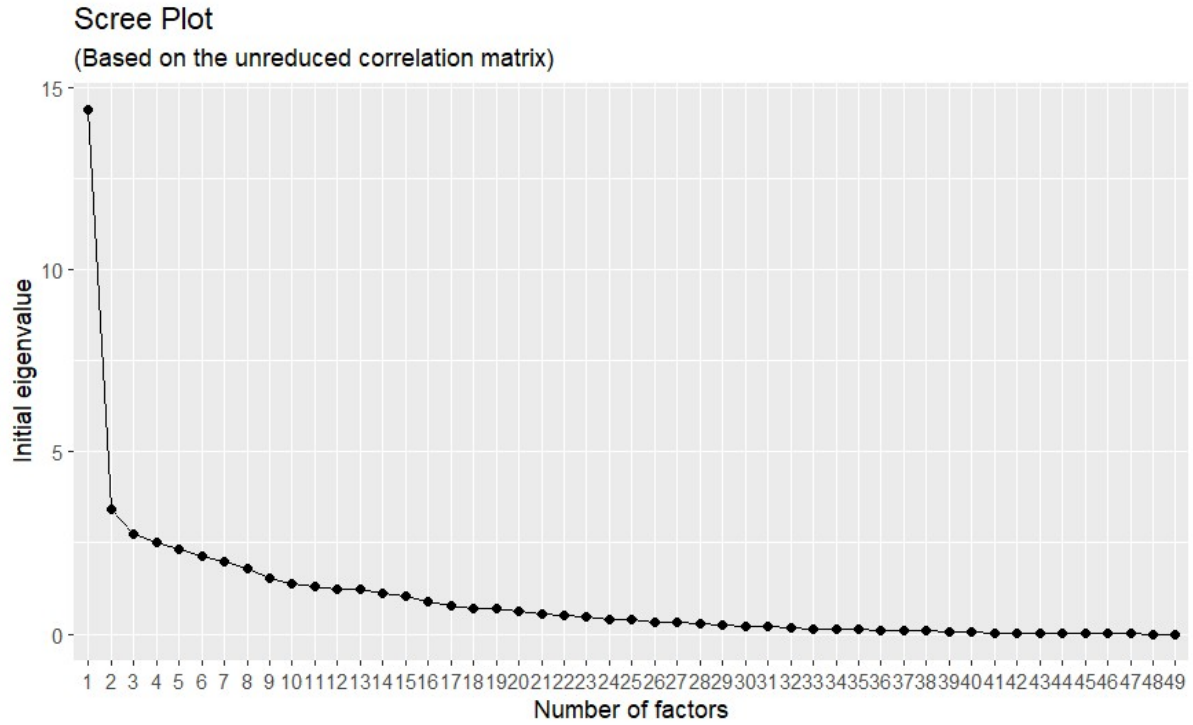


Figure 1. Scree Plot demonstrating the suggested number of factors.

Source: First author's work

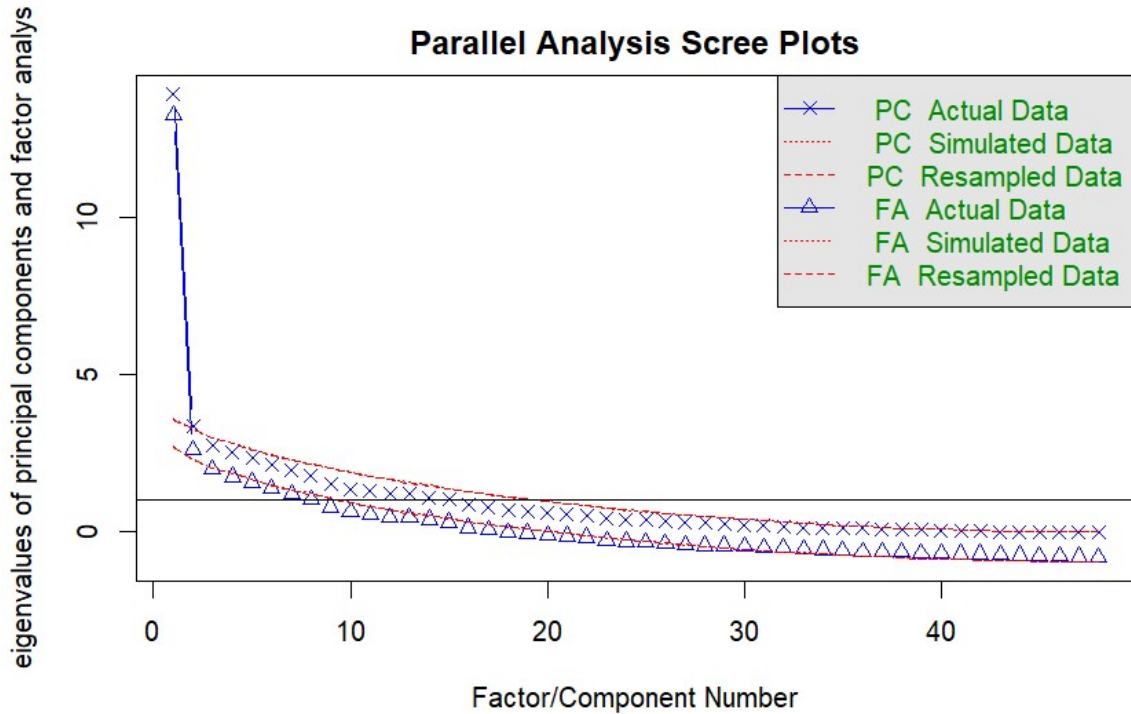


Figure 2. Parallel Analysis Scree Plots demonstrating the suggested number of factors.

Source: First author's work

Because of the scree plot and parallel analysis, it was decided to specify 2 factors in running the factor

function. The next step was to choose the rotation type. It is recommended in rotation to begin with the assumption that variables are not independent since they can be independent only in an ideal situation. After some manipulations, it was decided that the most readable results were obtained by employing the

oblique (promax) rotation method. This method is usually used for naturally correlated items, and it seems somewhat justified for this particular study, where one variable may cause or be interrelated with another one. The factor analysis findings are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Factor Analysis with loadings

Loadings:	Factor 1	Factor 2
Scalability	0.51	
Brand image	0.56	
Assortment	0.69	
Offline promotion	0.80	-0.47
Management experience	0.57	
IT knowledge	0.68	
Commitment/Support	0.63	
Human capital	0.74	
Employee qualification	0.80	
Training & Development	0.62	
Customer trust	0.62	
Government support	0.56	
Competition	0.54	
Lack of offline options	0.56	
Immigration	0.86	-0.34
Team spirit	0.81	
Privacy		0.73
Payment Safety	-0.30	0.95
Platform safety	-0.47	1.25
Internet quality		0.61
E-Service Quality		0.62
Financial control		0.52
Integration of strategies	0.36	0.35
Business model localization	0.46	
Product distinction		0.32
Copying Successful Business Model	0.40	
Strategic partnership		
Own supply chain		
Content quality	0.41	
Ease of usage	0.43	
Multilinguality	0.38	
Social Media integration		0.46
Payment Options		0.46
Availability		0.46
System speed	0.30	0.34
Multiplatform	0.44	
Price equals quality	0.49	
Sufficient segment	0.40	

Table 2. Continued

Loadings:	Factor 1	Factor 2
Online promotion	0.35	
Timely delivery	0.41	
Order update		0.36
Customer support	0.33	
Performance appraisal		
Employee soft skills	0.50	
System integration	0.40	
Internet connection		0.45
Computer literacy	0.36	
Word of Mouth	0.50	
Feedback	0.40	
	Factor 1	Factor 2
SS loadings	10.90	6.45
Proportion Var	0.22	0.13
Cumulative Var	0.22	0.35
	Factor 1	Factor 2
Factor1	1.00	0.69
Factor2	0.69	1.00
Test of the hypothesis that 2 factors are sufficient. The chi-square statistic is 1786.79 on 1079 degrees of freedom. The p-value is 7.93e-38		

Source: First author's work

To illustrate the above results, the following plot was designed:

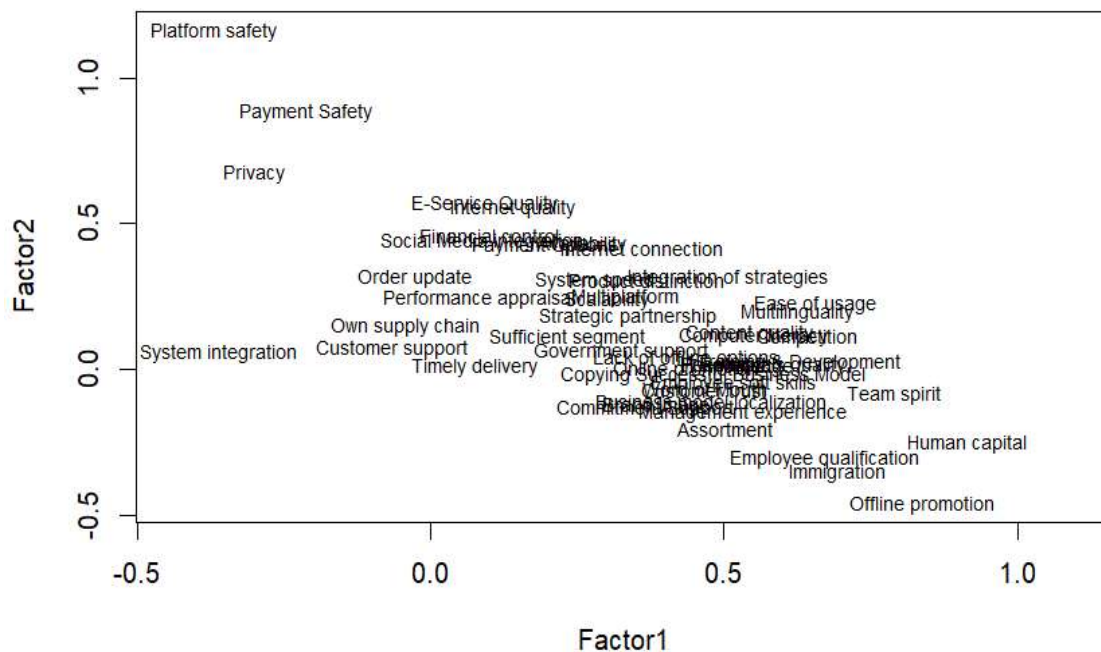


Figure 3. Factor 1 by Factor 2 plot to visualize the interpretation.

Source: First author's work

Note that the text cluttering was left intentionally to visualize that some factors received equal attention and, thus, received equally low importance, which means they were not significant in determining key success factors, in contrast to those that stay apart and closer to 1.

From a first look at the data, it seems that the elicited factors represent two camps: Factor 1 introduces the variables associated with the business effort to win customers' loyalty, while Factor 2 sounds more relevant to the third party, which is either banking services integrated into the website or/and application, or IT specialists arranging the services.

As can be seen from the plot above, there are outstanding items like *Platform safety*, *Payment safety*, and *Privacy* related to Factor 2 and *Offline promotion*, *Employee qualification*, *Assortment* (of products and services), *Human capital*, *Team spirit* along with *Immigration* (which stands for skilled labor inflow currently observed in Uzbekistan) associated with Factor 1.

A big accent is made on human resources, which is not on the priority list of other studies on e-commerce success in developing countries like Thailand, Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan, and India (Laosethakul & Boulton, 2007; Taylor & Owusu, 2012; Awa et al., 2015; Khan et al., 2019; Sharma & Aggarwal, 2019)—but is aligned with Li et al. (2020) and their study in China. Also, human capital is recognized as one of the most important business success catalysts in a new, post-COVID era (Hitt et al., 2020). It is promising that Uzbekistan goes with the world's best practices. Although previous studies were trying to polarize East and West (Sung, 2006) or developing and developed countries (Laosethakul & Boulton, 2007), Uzbekistan is considered a developing country but demonstrates findings similar to more developed countries.

There is also an interesting point about assortment, which was a separate item from the lack of offline alternative options or *product distinction*. This fact means that customers want to make sure they are enabled to click to buy their consumer basket products.

Indeed, a glance at the e-commerce applications reviews in Play Store by Google revealed the users' questions like "Why not all the products from a physical store are available online?". In an informal interview with a marketing association representative, product standardization is highly recommended as nothing can be done with touch and feel when purchasing culture. It has to deal with collectivistic society attributes claimed by Hofstede (1991) in his cultural dimensions and developed further by Laosethakul & Boulton (2007) in their study, where they characterized Thailand as a service-oriented nation, appreciating personal communication with a salesperson. This has also spread to Uzbekistan from

the ancient Silk Road, and it is hard to change but possible to modify.

Offline promotion was recognized as important as, in many cases, the customers do not use alternative shopping options because they are unaware of them.

As for Factor 2-related points: *Platform safety*, *Payment safety*, and *Privacy* demonstrate unfortunate stability with previous research findings in developing countries (Laosethakul & Boulton, 2007; Rakhmanov, 2009; Zhang and Okoroafo, 2014) and USAID (2022) report.

This research confirms that close attention must be paid to governmental regulations, policies, and laws regarding cybersecurity.

Interpretation of open-ended question answers

An open-ended question brought 5 responses that did not require a special analysis, and their interpretations are given below.

The question requiring comments and ideas revealed a hindrance for e-commerce deserving special attention from policymaking institutions. The respondent shared that Uzbekistan imports counterfeit products, which are normally sold offline and are hard to compete with due to a big price difference.

Among the other comments were the large sum of money required and the time it took for the audience to evaluate the necessity of the service. There was also a suggestion to start a business by selling at lower prices, the so-called dumping strategy. That strategy is almost always a specific characteristic of many Uzbekistan businesses to win the loyalty of the customers.

The analysis presented above on the factors influencing e-commerce success in Uzbekistan provides valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities in this developing market.

The research suggests that the factors influencing e-commerce success in developing countries are largely consistent, highlighting the importance of platform safety, payment safety, privacy, customer satisfaction, website quality, employee skills and knowledge, and product quality. This study, then, provides valuable insights into how these factors are specifically relevant to the Uzbekistan market.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to determine the Critical Success Factors influencing e-commerce development. Uzbekistan was taken as a case study because it represents a developing country with some outstanding elements contributing to the country's non-standard profile. This, in turn, increases the

researchers' attention. Eventually, the research's initial assumptions were confirmed, and the study demonstrated the factors that mainly constitute the Critical Success Factors for more developed countries. Thus, the classification of the countries into developing and developed, as previous studies have done, is not informative, and this study shows that each country needs an individual approach. Besides a theoretical contribution, this study's results are intended to provide hands-on orientation for practicing managers. They should pay attention to human capability, which is an employee professional qualification, along with soft skills, including team spirit.

Another point directly related to business is the assortment of the products/services offered.

Offline promotion is raising awareness of the existing shopping options.

The comments received in an open-ended question revealed that the weak points of the commerce regulations in Uzbekistan, such as counterfeit products, must be revisited to become more transparent and stimulating.

There was also a practical implication of interim findings during the data collection process, which can be useful for future research in Uzbekistan and might be applicable in other countries. This applies to respondent access, which is reported to be more effective through messenger rather than through e-mail.

Limitations and Future Research Avenues

- First, having collected data from 50 companies, the ability to generalize the reported results is restricted. Another point is that the survey was conducted in Uzbekistan, which might reduce the generalizability of the findings in other cultural or work contexts.
- Second, self-reported data collection methods may increase the likelihood of some biases.
- Third, this study employed a cross-sectional design, which does not provide information on how the firms' ideas evolved throughout the years or/and the influence of environmental factors.

There was also another note worth mentioning: the e-commerce representatives who came from personal contacts of the researcher (by coincidence) were more cooperative, probably due to the feeling of indebtedness. This could be considered a research limitation, but it is not the case for this particular context for several reasons. Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent, has been experiencing a boom in international university openings for the last 5 years. There are branches of British, American, South Korean

(4), Japanese, Indian, Italian, Singaporean, and Russian (5) universities, and new ones are about to open. The curriculum of many of these universities teaches students research skills and expects them to conduct surveys. Most students are interested in the practical aspects of running a business and approach small- and medium-sized enterprises, regularly asking for interviews or filling out a questionnaire. Some of the business representatives complained that they were bombarded with more than 20 e-mails from different universities during their assessment weeks. All of this causes enterprises to be reluctant to respond. This phenomenon can be referred to as 'research handicapping', meaning that the research is encouraged by yearly academic steps that it becomes less and less possible to find respondents. This happens in the case of Uzbekistan due to the overuse of online questionnaires in general and those addressed to businesspeople in particular. So, due to these limitations created by the research society itself, approaching personal contacts and asking them to 'do a favor' was one of the solutions to this issue.

As for future research, the following is recommended to take into account:

- An open-ended question in this study unveiled important topics that deserve attention from practical and theoretical points. Such valuable comments coming from precious experience contributed to this study. It would make the study even more valuable if the research tool were an interview, and so the use of interviews is recommended for future research in e-commerce in developing countries.
- The current study detected that one person (respondent) could be involved in the strategic decisions of more than one company. It is recommended that future researchers include a note in their questionnaire that it is preferable to complete a questionnaire for each business separately to make the sample more representative.

Although the study aimed to seek the opinion of those who succeeded in e-commerce, that is only one side of the coin. Subsequent studies are recommended to involve customers as more objective assessors of why the service is popular or what keeps them from shopping online. As an idea, the demographic data, e.g., age, can play a role, as suggested by Nguyen et al. (2022).

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