

# Fundamentals of E-Commerce and Retail Strategy

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## Abstract

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the fundamental components of digital retail strategies and the processes of creating competitive advantage, tracing the historical evolution of e-commerce to its contemporary applications. Initially limited to electronic data interchange and simple online transactions, e-commerce has transformed into a multidimensional ecosystem with the commercialization of the internet, the rise of digital platforms, and the advancement of mobile technologies. This transformation has reshaped not only the way businesses conduct trade but also their business models, customer relationships, and value creation strategies.

Different types of e-commerce such as B2B, B2C, C2C, C2B, and B2G present distinct opportunities and challenges for businesses and consumers alike. This diversity highlights that competitive advantage cannot be achieved through a single strategy; instead, firms must design tailored value propositions depending on the context. In this regard, the analysis of consumer behavior lies at the heart of e-commerce strategies, as consumer choices are influenced not only by functional factors such as price, quality, and accessibility but also by speed, security, personalization, and sustainability.

The chapter further discusses the importance of digital customer experience and the role of personalization in building competitive advantage. AI-powered recommendation systems, augmented reality applications, and omnichannel strategies emerge as critical tools for strengthening customer loyalty and brand attachment. Moreover, logistics, speed, and delivery strategies serve not only as operational advantages but also as symbolic signals of trustworthiness and customer-centricity, thereby reinforcing competitive advantage.

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From a strategic positioning perspective, Porter's generic strategies—cost leadership, differentiation, and focus—are reinterpreted in the digital age to align with the dynamics of e-commerce. Amazon's logistics-driven cost leadership, Apple's prestige-oriented differentiation, and Etsy's niche market approach exemplify this transformation. Additionally, brand identity and online positioning enhance the emotional and symbolic dimensions of digital value propositions, enabling deeper connections with customers.

In conclusion, this chapter argues that e-commerce should not be regarded merely as a sales channel but as a dynamic field that shapes strategic positioning, generates competitive advantage through digital value propositions, and redefines customer relationships. In an era of accelerating digital transformation, businesses must continuously renew their competitive strategies, strengthen customer-centered value propositions, and effectively integrate technology into their processes to achieve sustainable success.

## 1. Introduction

With technological advances and the widespread use of the internet, e-commerce has become one of the fundamental phenomena of the global economy. The pandemic processes experienced globally have contributed to the proliferation of e-commerce. Initially conducted through simple electronic data exchange, e-commerce transactions have evolved into a multi-layered system with the support of technologies such as artificial intelligence and data analytics. The foundations of e-commerce were laid in the 1960s with the development of electronic data interchange systems. With this system, businesses gained advantages in speed and standardization in processes such as placing and tracking orders, and sending invoices and shipping documents. During this period, it was used mainly in the B2B (Business to Business) field to improve processes. The commercialization of internet usage and the development of the World Wide Web (WWW) in the early 1990s marked an important turning point for e-commerce. With the establishment of companies such as Amazon and eBay, the Business to Consumer (B2C) dimension of e-commerce also began to develop. During this period, the ability to make online payments with credit cards emerged as a factor that accelerated and developed the process. In the 2000s, with the development of Web 2.0 technologies and the widespread use of social media platforms, consumers also became producers, playing a decisive role in decision-making processes such as recommending products, rating them, and paying attention to reviews.

One of the turning points in the development of e-commerce was the introduction of smartphones and mobile applications. Mobile commerce

made it easier for consumers to access products and created a desire for a different shopping experience. With the increase in the use of artificial intelligence systems and the support of these technologies since the beginning of the 2020s, e-commerce has reached a new dimension. Furthermore, the pandemic period has also directed consumers towards e-commerce more. The development of e-commerce has been effective in the development of many sectors such as logistics, health, and education. Technological innovations such as the metaverse and blockchain-based payment systems also have an important shaping power in the future of e-commerce (Pappas et al., 2023).

This ongoing digital transformation process is not only increasing the use of technological tools but also forcing businesses to restructure their business models, value delivery methods, experience delivery methods, and consequently, customer relationship management. The retail sector is undergoing fundamental changes in areas such as customer experience, data-driven decision-making, omnichannel strategy development, operational efficiency and effectiveness, and new business models. This digital transformation means not only the use of technological tools but also the redesign of business models, value creation methods, and customer relationships. The retail sector is one of the areas most affected by this transformation (Verhoef et al., 2021). Traditional retail is also being affected by change alongside e-commerce. Traditional retail and e-commerce have significant differences in terms of both business dynamics and customer experience. Traditional retail operates in stores, shopping centers, or physical locations.

The ability to test and physically examine products, as well as the use of shopping environments as a means of socializing, are significant advantages in traditional retail. E-commerce, on the other hand, offers location-independent shopping opportunities through online platforms. This service provided by online platforms has advantages for both consumers and businesses. While advantages such as time, cost, and convenience come to the fore for consumers, e-commerce also offers advantages for businesses in terms of cost structure compared to traditional retailing, with lower rent, inventory, and personnel expenses. E-commerce has lower fixed costs, but requires significant initial investment in digital infrastructure and logistics (Verhoef et al., 2021). There is also a clear difference in terms of customer experience. While traditional retail emphasizes the opportunity for customers to physically see and try products, e-commerce highlights the digital experience with personalized recommendations, 24/7 access, and technologies such as augmented reality (Rigby, 2011). When comparing

consumer access to stores, traditional retailing mostly serves a local or regional customer base, whereas e-commerce offers the opportunity to reach global markets and customers platforms such as Temu, Aliexpress, and Amazon are among the leading businesses providing services on a global scale. Providing services globally similarly necessitates the development of logistics systems. Furthermore, while services provided in traditional retail are limited to specific working hours, e-commerce's 24/7 service offers consumers more flexible shopping opportunities.

There are also differences in the strategies applied in customer retention efforts. While promotional activities in traditional retail are carried out through catalogs, brochures, and in-store promotions, e-commerce uses new methods such as digital advertising, social media, and influencer marketing. Another significant advantage of e-commerce over traditional retail is that while traditional retail has limited customer data, e-commerce allows for the collection of large data sets and enables data analysis. By tracking customer behavior in the digital environment, personalized experiences can be offered. In this context, although both models have their own unique advantages, the future of the retail sector today is largely built on hybrid, or omnichannel, approaches that integrate physical and digital elements (Verhoef et al., 2021; Brynjolfsson et al., 2013).

In today's rapidly digitalizing world, e-commerce is not just about selling products online. E-commerce has also become a field that is being rebuilt in the strategies businesses pursue in a competitive environment. Unlike traditional trade models, the fundamental concepts and definitions of e-commerce encompass multidimensional elements such as digital platforms, online marketplaces, payment systems, big data, artificial intelligence, and customer relationship management (Laudon & Traver, 2022). From this perspective, examining e-commerce conceptually is critically important for both academic studies and industry applications. It is well known that businesses' long-term success largely depends on their ability to gain a competitive advantage and sustain it. Porter's (1985) cost leadership, differentiation, and focus strategies must be reinterpreted in the digital age. Artificial intelligence-powered recommendation systems, fast logistics solutions, technology-integrated systems, and data security-based applications are at the forefront of businesses' value propositions. (Amit & Zott, 2021). This section aims to first outline the basic concepts and definitions of e-commerce, then examine strategic positioning approaches in online retail, and finally explain the relationship between digital value propositions and competitive advantage.

## 2. Core Concepts and Definitions in E-Commerce

E-commerce (electronic commerce) is defined as the buying and selling of goods and services via the internet or other digital networks (Laudon & Traver, 2022). E-commerce encompasses not only online shopping, but also customer relationship management, supply chain activities, electronic data interchange (EDI), and digital payment systems for businesses. It is a multidimensional process that involves the integrated management of marketing, logistics, finance, customer service, and information technology (Chaffey, 2015). Although the concept of e-commerce is often defined as an activity directed at consumers, it also encompasses many layers that facilitate relationships between businesses, digital interactions between public institutions, and even commercial transactions between individuals themselves. Digitalization has expanded the boundaries of e-commerce to a global scale, giving rise to new sub-areas such as cross-border trade, mobile commerce (m-commerce), and social commerce (s-commerce) (OECD, 2020).

### *Types of E-Commerce*

#### *Business to Business (B2B)*

The type of commerce where buyer and seller businesses conduct purchase and sale transactions online is called business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce. Until the mid-1990s, B2B e-commerce was conducted only between large companies through Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) and was applied in a limited manner outside the internet environment (Diker&Varol, 2013). Businesses are evaluated under the umbrella of e-commerce in terms of obtaining invoices, paying fees, placing orders, and logistics operations in the digital environment. B2B e-commerce involves the exchange of raw materials, semi-finished products, components, or wholesale goods. For example, Alibaba and ThomasNet are cited as examples of B2B business models. Research shows that B2B e-commerce accounts for the largest share of global e-commerce volume (UNCTAD, 2021).



*Figure 1: B2B E-commerce*

*Source: <https://thinpress.com/what-is-b2b-business/>, 2024*

### *Business to Consumer (B2C)*

The Business-to-Consumer (B2C) e-commerce model refers to the type of e-commerce where businesses deliver goods and services directly to end consumers. In the present day, platforms such as Amazon, Trendyol, Hepsiburada, and Temu represent some of the most prominent examples of B2C e-commerce. Rapidly evolving consumer behaviors, personalized recommendation systems, and mobile commerce applications continuously drive the development of the B2C model (Laudon & Traver, 2022). The introduction of online pizza ordering by Pizza Hut in 1994 has inspired a wide range of B2C e-commerce models, enabling businesses to offer diverse products, from books and automobiles to computers and local delicacies. Similar to Business-to-Business (B2B) e-commerce, B2C e-commerce can also be conducted indirectly. However, it also falls within the category of “direct commerce” due to its inclusion of online ordering, delivery, and payment processes for virtual products and services such as music albums, software, and databases (Toprak, 2014).



*Figure 2: B2C E-commerce*

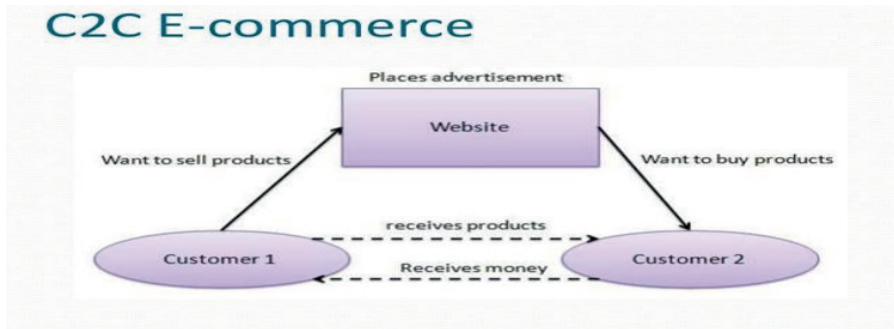
*Source: <https://ecomclips.com/blog/6-things-to-know-before-you-launch-b2c-business-start-an-e-commerce-business/>, 2023*

### *Consumer to Consumer (C2C)*

Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) e-commerce encompasses transactions where individuals engage in the exchange of goods or services with one another. Platforms such as eBay, Sahibinden, Dolap, and Letgo are successful examples of C2C e-commerce. Second-hand sales conducted through social media are also considered a form of the C2C model. The primary objective of C2C e-commerce is to enable consumers to sell directly to other consumers without intermediaries, allowing sellers to achieve higher profits and buyers to purchase products at more competitive prices.

The C2C e-commerce model provides significant advantages to both consumers and the economy by facilitating direct transactions of goods and services between individuals. The limited involvement of intermediaries and the absence of additional costs, such as store rent or personnel expenses, enable products to be offered at more affordable prices. This creates cost advantages for consumers while providing sellers with a low-cost sales channel (Turban et al., 2018). Furthermore, by facilitating the sale of second-hand products, C2C e-commerce enables the reuse of idle resources. This contributes to both individual economic benefits and environmental sustainability. From this perspective, C2C e-commerce is recognized as a contributor to the circular economy and sustainable consumption principles (OECD, 2020). Consequently, C2C e-commerce generates significant value for both consumers and small-scale entrepreneurs by providing ease of access, cost advantages, and support for sustainability.





*Figure 3: C2C E-commerce*

*Source: <https://www.openpr.com/news/1808177/c2c-e-commerce-market-to-2024-scrutinized-in-new-research>, 2019*

### *Consumer to Business (C2B)*

Consumer-to-Business (C2B) e-commerce refers to a model where consumers offer products or value to businesses. For instance, individuals providing services on freelance platforms such as Upwork and Fiverr, or consumers supplying feedback and content to companies, are considered part of the C2B framework. In the era of digital transformation, the rise of individuals as content producers (prosumers) has increased the significance of this model (Kotler et al., 2017). Similar to Business-to-Consumer (B2C) e-commerce, C2B involves interactions between businesses and customers, but it reverses their roles. In C2B e-commerce, it is the customer who creates value for the business and receives payment in return (Gedik, 2021). C2B represents transactions between customers and producers, with its most distinctive feature being the ability of customers to customize personalized production (Zhao & Feng, 2017: 1).



## C2B BUSINESS MODEL

Features of C2B

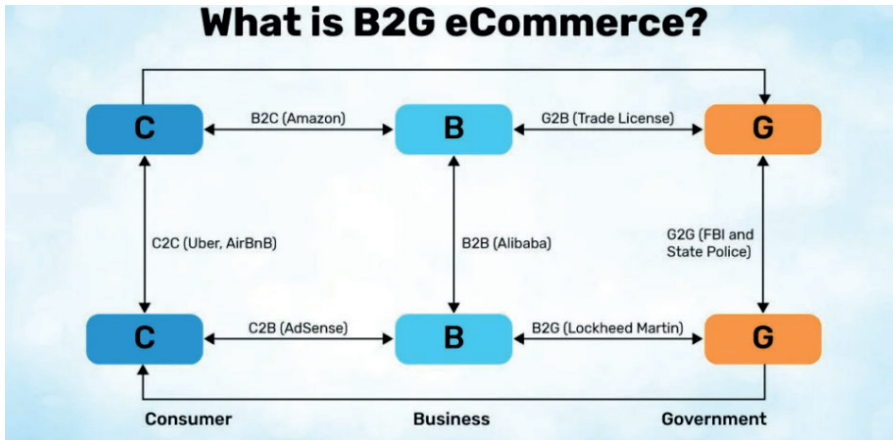


*Figure 4: C2B E-commerce*

*Source: <https://www.sketchbubble.com/en/presentation-c2b-business-model.html>*

### *Business to Government (B2G/G2B)*

The Business-to-Government (B2G) or Government-to-Business (G2B) model encompasses digital transactions between businesses and public institutions. Examples of this model include electronic tenders, public procurement, and online tax payment systems. B2G applications play a critical role, particularly in ensuring the transparent and efficient management of public procurement (OECD, 2020). B2G e-commerce involves the use of the internet for public procurement, licensing procedures, public formalities, and the filing of tax declarations between businesses and government entities. However, within the total volume of e-commerce, the B2G e-commerce market does not hold a significant share (Gedik, 2021).



*Figure 5: B2G E-commerce*

*Source: <https://paxcom.ai/blog/different-e-commerce-models/>, 2023*

E-commerce types reveal the differences between the actors and processes of digital trade; however, the common intersection of these structures is the customer experience. In this context, the digital customer experience that has emerged with digital transformation has become central to e-commerce strategies. The evolution of e-commerce has transformed traditional customer behaviors, giving rise to the concept of the digital customer. Experiences designed for traditional customers are governed by different dynamics compared to those created in digital environments. E-commerce businesses strive to create memorable experiences for customers in virtual settings, taking steps to enhance all touchpoints to ensure customer satisfaction. Digital customer experience refers to the level of satisfaction customers derive from their interactions with a business or brand through digital channels. The concept of experience extends beyond online shopping processes, encompassing all customer touchpoints with the business, including websites, mobile applications, social media, chatbots, digital support services, and personalized marketing elements (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Compared to traditional customer experience approaches, digital customer experience is characterized by a multichannel (omnichannel) and interactive structure. The expectations of digital customers from digital environments are not limited to merely purchasing goods or services. Factors such as speed, convenience, personalized service, security, and emotional connection are also central to the digital customer experience (Verhoef et al., 2021). Research indicates that digital customer loyalty, much like traditional customer loyalty,

directly impacts brand image and repurchase intentions. In particular, the analysis of large volumes of data generated through e-commerce, artificial intelligence-based recommendation systems, and virtual/augmented reality technologies play a critical role in personalizing and enhancing experiences for digital customers (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

The importance of digital customer experience is increasingly evident for businesses today. Consumers now prioritize not only the price and quality of products but also the ease of the online shopping process, the reliability of digital services, and the alignment of offerings with their personal needs. Consequently, digital customer experience occupies a central place in contemporary competitive strategies and is regarded as a key factor in achieving sustainable competitive advantage for businesses.

### **3. Strategic Positioning in Online Retail**

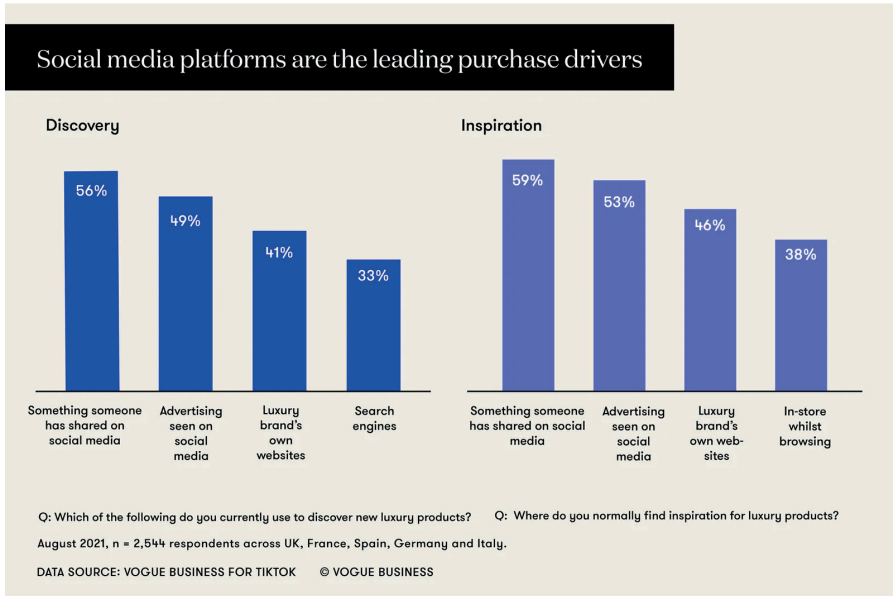
In a highly competitive environment, businesses must differentiate themselves from competitors by implementing a sustainable positioning strategy. In online retailing, strategic positioning refers to the systematic alignment of all value-creating elements to achieve a competitive advantage. The success of strategic positioning depends on accurately defining core components, understanding market dynamics, and holistically managing elements such as pricing, product variety, and store design.

Adopting a customer-centric marketing approach is a critical factor in shaping digital retail strategies. In this context, technological infrastructure, logistics, customer service, data analytics, and digital marketing tools must be integrated into a cohesive framework (Verhoef et al., 2021). Each element brought together in this manner not only strengthens a business's digital presence but also directly impacts its brand value and the quality of relationships established with customers.

The cornerstone of achieving success in strategic positioning for e-commerce businesses lies in accurately identifying the target customer base and conducting in-depth analyses of customer behaviors. One of the greatest advantages provided by the digital environment is the ability to collect large volumes of data and utilize tools to analyze them. Through these tools, consumer purchasing tendencies, demographic characteristics, and current trends can be analyzed more accurately. This enables businesses to perform more precise segmentation to identify their ideal customer base and creates opportunities for personalized marketing initiatives. Particularly following the pandemic, the rapid rise in online shopping habits has led to swiftly changing yet enduring consumer trends (PwC, 2023).

In strategic positioning, pricing policies and product assortment emerge as other crucial elements. In a dynamic market environment, dynamic pricing increases firms' flexibility in responding to market conditions. Providing the appropriate level of product variety to an increasingly informed and demanding customer base plays a critical role in meeting customer expectations (Chaffey, 2015). In this regard, the design of user-friendly interfaces, visually appealing layouts, and accurate and detailed product presentations accelerate the decision-making process of digital customers and strengthen their loyalty to the firm or brand (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

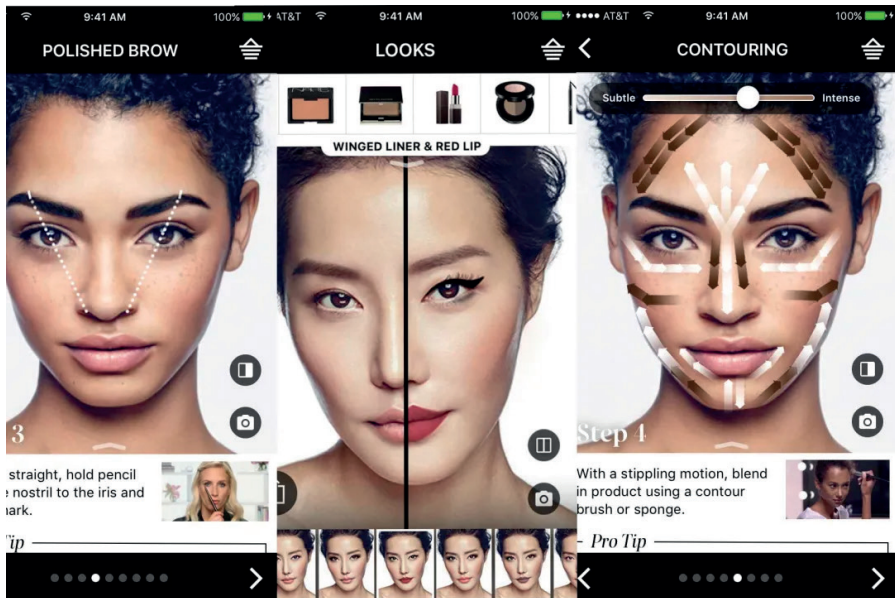
One of the most significant aspects of strategic positioning in online retailing is the firm's ability to develop a distinctive brand identity and adapt it to the dynamics of the digital environment. Brand identity encompasses the values, symbols, and messages that shape consumers' perceptions of a company (Kapferer, 2012). In digital contexts, building a brand identity requires a multidimensional approach that extends beyond traditional visual elements such as logos. Elements like website design, social media engagement, customer service quality, and content marketing strategies serve as critical touchpoints that collectively define how the brand is experienced online. As research suggests, firms competing in digital markets must deliver not only functional value through their products but also emotional and symbolic value, fostering stronger and more meaningful relationships with digital customers (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010). For example, Apple's online stores emphasize minimalist design and premium service, thereby reinforcing the brand's identity of innovation and quality, while IKEA's online experiences, enhanced by augmented reality (AR) applications, create an interactive bond between the customer and the brand. These cases illustrate that online positioning is not merely about facilitating sales but also about strengthening brand identity. As further evidence, a study by *Vogue Business* highlights that the social media platform TikTok influences impulsive purchase decisions among younger luxury consumers by appealing to emotional triggers such as "happiness" and "sharing." The platform's content provides effective means of fostering emotional proximity between brands and consumers (Vogue Business, 2021).



*Figure 6: Vogue Business for TIKTOK*

*Source: Vogue Business, 2021*

Nike, through its **Nike Run Club** application, integrates its users into a digital sports community. Users are able to track their runs, share their achievements, and motivate each other. This application goes beyond simply selling running shoes; it provides consumers with a sense of *belonging* and *collective accomplishment*. Similarly, Sephora's **AR-based Virtual Artist** application enables consumers to virtually try on makeup products. This experience not only offers functional convenience in product testing but also provides users with a sense of *self-discovery* and *confidence*.



*Figure 7: Sephora Virtual Artist App*

*Source: theverge.com, 2017*

#### 4. Competitive Advantage and Digital Value Propositions

Gaining competitive advantage and offering value propositions play a decisive role in ensuring the long-term success of businesses in an increasingly digitalized economy. To achieve competitive advantage, firms must secure a position that is distinct and superior to that of their rivals (Porter, 1985). Providing value propositions is a critical element in establishing such an advantage. In digital contexts, value propositions can be defined as the set of unique benefits offered in the online environment that lead customers to prefer a particular platform or e-commerce firm over alternative options (Amit & Zott, 2021).

Traditionally, competitive advantage has been explained through strategies of cost leadership, differentiation, and focus. However, with digitalization, these strategies need to be redefined within the new dynamics of e-commerce firms and digital platforms. Amazon's fast delivery and competitive pricing policies, Apple's design- and prestige-oriented differentiation, and Etsy's niche market strategy exemplify this transformation (Laudon & Traver, 2022). Importantly, digitalization has moved competition beyond price and product variety to include factors such as data analytics, artificial intelligence,

personalized services, and unique customer experiences, all of which now lie at the core of building competitive advantage (Verhoef et al., 2021).

In the digital environment, value propositions extend beyond functional benefits to encompass elements such as speed, convenience, trust, personalization, and emotional connection. For instance, Spotify's personalized playlists, Netflix's recommendation algorithms, and Duolingo's individualized tracking system illustrate how digital value propositions are operationalized in practice. In this sense, digital value propositions not only shape consumer preferences but also strengthen the strategic positioning of brands in the online environment. In today's e-commerce systems, two complementary dimensions emerge: while competitive advantage ensures that firms secure a sustainable place in the market, digital value propositions have become the key to developing customer-centered strategies and achieving long-term growth.

With digitalization, one of the primary ways of differentiating the customer experience is through **personalization**. Experiences designed for mass audiences often fall short in satisfying digital customers. In order to provide a personalized customer experience, consumers' past behaviors, purchasing preferences, and demographic characteristics must be taken into account. Strategies that deliver personalized products or services based on these attributes lie at the very center of digital value propositions and offer a significant competitive advantage (Arora et al., 2008).

Another critical source of competitive advantage in digital environments lies in logistics and delivery strategies. In online retailing, speed is not merely a customer expectation but has become a core element of the value proposition. For instance, Amazon's *Prime* program, offering same-day or next-day delivery, serves as a decisive differentiator that significantly shapes customer preferences (Hübner et al., 2016). Consequently, enhancing the efficiency and responsiveness of logistics operations is essential for building and sustaining competitive advantage. With the advancement of digital technologies, innovations such as automation, robotic warehousing systems, and AI-driven demand forecasting models have transformed e-commerce logistics by increasing operational speed and reducing costs simultaneously (Christopher, 2016). Fast delivery represents more than just a functional benefit; it also carries **symbolic value**. It creates perceptions of reliability and customer orientation in the minds of consumers. This, in turn, strengthens the impact of digital value propositions on customer loyalty and brand preference.



## 5. Conclusion

E-commerce has evolved from simple transactions based on electronic data interchange into a multi-layered ecosystem supported by artificial intelligence and data analytics, becoming one of the core dynamics of the global economy. Initially designed to enhance the efficiency of inter-organizational processes, this structure has, with the commercialization of the internet and the widespread adoption of digital platforms, transformed into a model that can directly reach consumers. With its different forms such as B2B, B2C, C2C, C2B, and B2G, e-commerce has not only altered the form of trade but also reshaped business models and value creation strategies.

The study highlights that digital customer experience is at the heart of sustainable success in today's competitive environment. Customer expectations are no longer limited to product price or quality; instead, factors such as speed, convenience, personalization, security, and emotional connection have come to the forefront. In this respect, AI-powered recommendation systems, augmented reality applications, and omnichannel strategies have emerged as key tools that enhance customer satisfaction and strengthen loyalty.

From the perspective of strategic positioning, achieving competitive advantage in digital retail depends on the holistic management of components such as market analysis, target audience definition, pricing strategies, product assortment, and digital store design. Furthermore, building a strong brand identity and aligning it with the dynamics of the online environment requires a competitive approach that incorporates not only functional benefits but also emotional and symbolic values.

Competitive advantage and digital value propositions stand out as two complementary strategic dimensions in contemporary e-commerce. Amazon's fast delivery infrastructure, Apple's design- and prestige-oriented differentiation, Etsy's focus on niche markets, and Netflix and Spotify's personalized recommendation algorithms serve as concrete examples of competitive strategies redefined by digitalization. Logistics, speed, and delivery strategies provide not only functional benefits but also symbolic value, reinforcing customer trust and strengthening brand loyalty.

In conclusion, the future of e-commerce is being shaped at the intersection of technological innovations, customer-centric strategies, and hybrid business models. For businesses, the path to creating competitive advantage lies in continuously developing digital value propositions, integrating data- and technology-driven solutions into business processes, and building

sustainable relationships with customers. In this regard, e-commerce should not be seen merely as a digital sales channel, but rather as one of the most critical domains of strategic positioning and value creation in the modern economy.

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