

# The Status of the Egyptian Networked Economy after Facebook Revolution and Recommendations for Improvement

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*The amount of e-commerce conducted on a global scale has grown exponentially as Internet access has become more widespread. Business-to-business, as well as business-to-consumer, electronic transactions add much to a company's profitability and are an expectation in developed countries. Nevertheless, there are many countries that have barriers to Internet usage and this has hindered adoption of e-commerce practices. After the Egyptian face book youth revolution which took place in January, 2011 it has been apparent that the Internet is a promising platform for business communication in Egypt as well as other Arab countries. This paper presents an overview of the current status on e-commerce in Egypt in 2011. The paper analyzed secondary sources to investigate the main barriers that hinder e-commerce in Egypt. The research findings indicated that the lack of trust, e-commerce mechanism, and Internet infrastructure are representing the main obstacles for e-commerce adoption in Egypt. Based on the identified results recommendations were provided for increasing the Egyptian e-commerce volume.*

**Field of Research:** Marketing

## 1. Introduction

E-commerce (also known as e-business and e-tailing) is business conducted electronically and may include elements of electronic data interchange (EDI), online transaction processing, electronic funds transfer, Internet marketing and inventory management. The Internet is used as a vehicle to conduct e-commerce transactions. The two main types of e-commerce are Business-to-Business (B2B) and Business-to-Consumer (B2C). Developing countries are still facing major challenges to benefit from the networked economy. Although the Internet has been heavily used for social and political communication in Egypt e-commerce volume is insignificant. The Egyptian face book revolution is a clear evident for e-commerce potentiality in developing countries. This paper provides

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## **Ramzy, Ogden&Ogden**

practical and academic answer behind the insignificant e-commerce business in Egypt. The objective of this study is to spot the main barriers for e-commerce adoption in Egypt and to provide solid recommendations for improving the current status.

To address the research problem we started by identifying the barriers for e-commerce acceptance in Egypt and how the Internet is being perceived by the Egyptian government. The Internet user profiles in the Middle East are provided followed by some previous success stories to prove the e-commerce potential in Egypt. This e-commerce opportunity is reflected in the business and consumer technology readiness. We considered this as a platform to provide our solid recommendations.

### **2. Barriers to Acceptance**

There are many barriers for nations to overcome in order to take full advantage of the networked economy. According to Chaffey (2009) there are several barriers to Internet usage from consumers' perspectives such as

- No perceived benefit
- Lack of trust
- Security problems
- Lack of skills
- Cost

In addition, in many developing countries, English is not as commonly spoken, which is another barrier to Internet usage. In addition there are political concerns. Opposition movements have used the Internet to mobilize and coordinate protests. For example there was Iran's June 2009 "Twitter Revolution" following the disputed presidential elections in which thousands used electronic communication to express their discontent.

The Internet has been used by a variety of groups with diverse agendas, from secular liberals through to trade unionists and Islamists. In general new media have contributed to the advancement of civil society and the promotion of accountability. In Egypt the government has taken positive steps to encourage Internet usage especially to switch the dialup connection to the faster Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) connectivity. About 61% of the Egyptian households connecting to the Internet at home used an ADSL connection in 2008, compared to 56% in 2007. As a result, the number of Internet subscribers in Egypt as of March 2008 is approximately 482 thousand subscribers. There are still many Egyptians not using the Internet. Reasons cited are: they don't know how to use it (64%) they believe that there is no need for it (30%) or denial of a contract (9.5%) (The Future of Internet Economy in Egypt... Statistical Profile, 2008).

### **3. Censorship**

In 2008 Egypt's former Prime Minister, Ahmad Nazif surprised Egypt's Internet community by leaving a comment on an opposition blog. In his comment, Nazif responded directly to criticism regarding the education system, while praising freedom

## Ramzy, Ogden&Ogden

of speech in the blogosphere. However, governments have also responded with a crackdown on opposition websites and applying censorship. Internet and cell phones blocking occurred in January 27, 2011 during Egypt facebook revolution.

The strictest censorship is practiced in Saudi Arabia, which in 2009 ordered Internet cafes to install hidden surveillance cameras and keep a record of customer's names. However, Internet users have generally been able to circumvent censorship (Problems with Internet in Egypt..., 2010).

While governments in the region understand the importance of the Internet, they are concerned over its use by opposition movements. Censorship and crackdowns on bloggers have become frequent. Iran leads the region with 41.1 million Internet users as of 2008. Egypt came second in the same year with 12.6 million. When examined relative to population size, the widest access to the Internet was found again in Iran (57.0 users per 100 inhabitants), followed by the United Arab Emirates (56.4 users per 100 inhabitants) (Problems with Internet in Egypt 2010).

### 4. Internet User Profiles

Studies of the Arab and Iranian blogosphere, conducted by Harvard University in 2008 and 2009, provide a demographic profile of Internet users. Arab and Iranian bloggers were overwhelmingly young (under the age of 35). Most bloggers were male, while the percentage of women among younger bloggers (under 25 years old) was almost equal to men, which suggests that the digital gap between men and women is closing.

Bloggers tend to cluster according to country, with interests varying between politics, religion and culture. Online retailing offers consumers greater choice and convenience. Internet retailing is developing rapidly in the region, especially (though not exclusively) in the small Gulf states such as Kuwait and UAE. From international brand megastores to family-owned shops, businesses are expanding their online presence to capture the growing market. Internet literacy improves chances of success for these businesses. In addition, the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector is growing across the Middle East and North Africa, providing employment opportunities in countries such as Jordan and Egypt, which suffer from high unemployment.

According to Euromonitor, Internet access in the Middle East and North Africa has expanded rapidly reaching 85.5 million users in 2008 (5.2% of the world's users). Internet users in the region are typically under 35 years old and predominantly male, although women are catching up in this area. The dominance of Arabic allows addressing a wide audience in many countries. The region's business environment has benefited from advances in Internet access and increases in information availability make it easier to conduct business. The spread of the Internet is part of a wider trend of growing access to media and communications in the region. In the 1990s and 2000s satellite TV systems and mobile phones became a standard household item even in poor countries in the Middle East.

Internet skills increase human capital and help to promote knowledge-based economic sectors. This could assist in narrowing the gap between resource-poor countries, such

## **Ramzy, Ogden&Ogden**

as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco on one hand, and the hydrocarbon-rich economies of the Gulf on the other (Problems with Internet in Egypt 2010).

### **5. Successes**

On January 25, 2011 the political environment of Egypt changed when Egyptian youth toppled the authoritarian regime that ruled the country for thirty years. Facebook and other online communities facilitated the revolution which has been deemed, "The Facebook Revolution". The Egyptian youth are changing the face of their nation as a brand. It is believed that the youth revolution will furnish the appropriate business and legal environment for modern trading, stability and growth for the nation of Egypt. There is a room for growth in the e-commerce sector in Egypt especially with the younger segments. This area has not been investigated in previous studies; although there have been some successes in this area. For example, Otlob.com a very successful fast food home delivery intermediary, has been offering services in Egypt since the late 1990s. Many e-commerce techniques and tools have been practiced by Otlob.com in addition to targeting the right segment (youth target market). The e-commerce potential in Egypt is tremendous although the picture is currently bleak.

Otlob.com followed their success with another business that sells flowers and pharmaceuticals. Ahmed Helmy, Otlob's marketing and Web development manager explained, "To encourage people to order online, we offer discounts at some restaurants, flowers are 25 percent cheaper than you get them from a store and pharmaceutical products are 10 percent cheaper" (Zayan 2010).

### **6. Businesses and Consumers Technology Readiness**

Although not all potential consumers have access to the Internet, there are indications that adoption will not be difficult. Already customer self service techniques that use technology are being aggressively used, especially in the service sector domain. Banks' clients now are used to automated teller machines, official paper documents are now being handled on the Internet, airline companies and agencies are providing their services online. Consumers are ready for the technology revolution that the Internet provides.

Businesses are also technologically ready. According to "The Future of Internet Economy in Egypt... Statistical Profile May 2008," 93.3% of the Egyptian enterprises use the Internet for communicating with other enterprises. Sending and receiving emails is the most common purpose of using the Internet among Egyptian enterprises. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of the Egyptian enterprises use the Internet either to get information from governmental authorities or to obtain information regarding research activities. A little over one-fourth of the Egyptian companies (26.8%) use the Internet to deal with the banking sector in terms of conducting financial services. There is much room for growth in the business sector's use of the Internet.

## **7. Recommendations**

Egypt is missing the virtual transactions opportunities; however the Internet consumers' usage curve is increasing annually. The authors believe that Egypt can improve the growth of e-commerce by instituting these recommendations:

- Make infrastructure improvements
- Deliver added value
- Focus on co-creation of value
- Practice disintermediation
- Consider the business and consumer culture
- Target market to the youth segment
- Focus on Logistics
- Grow Integrated Marketing Communication

### **7.1 Make Infrastructure Improvements**

According to a study by McConnell International, Egypt still requires infrastructure improvements to facilitate e-commerce business to consumers' transaction. This day will come soon as the Internet technology infrastructure is getting less expensive overtime. The availability of high speed Internet service is a step in the right direction (Zayan 2010).

### **7.2 Deliver Added Value and Focus on Co-Creation of Value**

As Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) stated co-creation of value is based on the desire of a consumer to act positively with the provider to co-create value with the provider in terms of interacting and choosing experiences that fulfil desires. Never before have there been more empowered shoppers who are shaping the value that they want to receive and consume from providers. The concept is no longer customizing a particular product or object; it has to do with tailoring an entire offering according to consumer requirements (Kotler and Armstrong 2009). This era is witnessing open dialogue between business partners, interacting together to prosper together. This is one of the reasons that the Internet is eliminating the role of transactional selling (Futrell 2008).

In developing countries, consumers don't have the same access to providers. This picture will change soon as consumers in developing countries gain power. The Internet accessibility is increasing especially in the youth segment and the wide distribution of Internet cafés as a newest trend for recreation in Egypt (12,568,900 Internet users as of June/09, 15.9% of the population) (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/af/eg.htm>). Consequently, Egyptian companies should focus on delivering added value and creating experiences that make customers want to patronize their e-tail sites. Companies can deliver value through personalization. When consumers have the power to get customized products they are receiving exactly what they want. Loyalty and positive word-of-mouth are likely outcomes.

### 7.3 Online Customer Services

With e-commerce transaction growth, the success of e-commerce depends not merely on website presence but, also on customer service (Yang & Fang 2001; Zeithaml, Parasuraman&Malhotra 2002). E-service quality is defined as the overall customer assessment and judgment of e-service delivery in the virtual marketplace (Santos 2003). E-service quality is more important than customer services activities provided offline, because the electronic customer is dealing with intangibles. One of the primary ways to judge an e-tailer is through service activities. It's very easy for a consumer to switch to another site that is perceived to meet their needs.

There are no switching costs from the customer side to explore the net until reaching the e-service quality attributes desired. E-service quality is not limited to assessing the quality of the real buying and selling transaction; but goes deeper to assess the quality attributes of the social networking and community websites (Kuo 2003).

There are several elements related to e-service quality. Web design is the most important element; since web design is related to aesthetic side and the practical or the functional domain (Mohamed et al. 2005; Than &Grandon 2002). Reliability is another important element related to online e-service quality (Lee & Lin 2005). Reliability in the sense that the customer can rely on the website to accomplish the visit objective (Albert & Sanders 2003). Reliability means that each time the customer accesses the website they get the same consistent value or experience. Another important element in the e-service quality context is the responsiveness factor. Customers want a fast response when they transact online; they don't want to waste their time for material to be downloaded. When they do have to wait, the customer wants to know how long the wait will be. Navigation speed and responding to customers' inquiries are all contributing to effectiveness of the responsiveness element (Parasuraman, Berry &Zeithmal 1988; Yang & Fang 2001; Kim, Lee & Pan 2002).

Trust is another element that is within the e-service quality context. Trust is an essential element especially in a developing country like Egypt; because many potential customers do not fully trust Internet transactions. Trust is a concern in commerce in general and in e-commerce in particular due to concerns that online stores can behave opportunistically (Reichheld&Schefter 2000). The level of trust influences customer purchasing activity and determines customer willingness to complete the transaction and consider future ones as well (Gefen, Karahanna& Straub 2003).

### 7.4 Practice Disintermediation

Another recommendation for Egyptian e-commerce businesses is to examine disintermediation that the Internet enables (Strauss, El-Ansary& Frost 2003). Disintermediation is the mechanism, which enables the firm to bypass its regular intermediaries. With disintermediation, customers are able to access the firm's electronic storefront directly without dealing with intermediaries. Communication is direct with the firm manufacturing or providing the product/service. Accordingly, the firm is able to cancel all intermediaries' markups and thus is in a better position to reduce its

## **Ramzy, Ogden&Ogden**

final price to consumers. The firm may think of adding value by providing the unexpected or by differentiating its products (Ogden & Togden 2005). Disintermediation is practiced in the selling side as was discussed previously and or in the buying side also. In the buying side companies are able to disintermediate its middlemen suppliers and deal directly with its essential vendors only. Based on this analysis disintermediation may happen in the upstream and downstream domains to increase the efficiency margin and to gain competitive advantage. These actions can give companies a competitive advantage.

It may not be possible to eliminate all intermediaries, especially those with technical roles, but they may be encouraged to participate by adding extra value in the process (Albert & Sanders 2003).

### **7.5 Consider the Business and Consumer Culture**

Egypt as the rest of the Arab world shares the same culture dimensions as was addressed by the Hofstede (1991) model. Egypt is high in uncertainty avoidance; has a fixed mindset to address the future in a fatalistic manner. Heavily influence by religion, any future view depends on the will of God. Accordingly the population is a risk avoiding society and strongly resists ambiguity. Egypt is a large power distance community; inequality is practised in the Egyptian society. The Egyptians, in general, don't trust the government as a result of the autocratic regime. All the above mentioned factors especially the uncertainty avoidance elements contribute as obstacles to e-commerce transactions in Egypt. Egyptians also prefer face-to-face interaction instead of screen-to-face interactions (Mohamed et al. 2005) which makes it more difficult for online transactions. These gaps should be handled sensitively by conveying the message to different stakeholders that the Internet is available to add value to both consumers and providers.

As many nations in the East, Egypt is a high context society when it comes to communication. This means that many things are left unsaid and are understood through culture. Meaning has more to do with context than words. Thus it can be difficult to understand what is being said without understanding the culture. Other conventional cultural barriers shouldn't be neglected on the Internet. Colours, language, sex appeals, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and religion should be taken collectively into consideration when addressing local customers.

Marketers can't take the cultural elements for granted. If they are keen to attract customers and engage them online, then local customs and traditions should be addressed online as one does with traditional brick and mortar stores. If firms don't protect their customer's cultural concerns they risk losing their momentum and may unintentionally generate negative word of mouth.

### **7.6 Target Market to the Youth Segment**

As was previously mentioned, Egyptian youth, aged 15 to 25, are the heaviest Internet users. Other customers may not perceive any benefit from adopting the Internet for e-

## **Ramzy, Ogden&Ogden**

commerce transactions. The youth segment is more willing to adopt the Internet for e-commerce transactions because they are used to electronic gadgetry. It is recommended that providers try to engage the Egyptian youth segment more with online transactions. After getting enough of the youth segment involved, businesses can target other age groups with incentives to encourage them to participate in online activities. For the youth segment providers may consider community sites as the main platform for lead generation (i.e. youtube.com, facebook.com, and secondlife.com). Placing banner ads in these sites may generate traffic as an initial step which will be followed by other engaging, retaining, learning, and relating activities (Albert & Sanders 2003).

For the elder segment, providers should enhance the Internet with value-added outcomes, especially in the service sector. Focus on fast delivery, better prices, selling complimentary products, providing deeper information regarding the offer, and customer service activities are considered the main attractions for older segments. Elderly people in Egypt are less likely to use the Internet (less than 3% of users). There is also a gender gap for the Internet usage in Egypt as males account for 61% of users while females accounted for 39% of individual usage (The Future of Internet Economy in Egypt 2008).

### **7.7 Merchandizing Buying and Handling Logistics**

The emphasis in this section is focused on the business provider. E-tailers need to concentrate on merchandise buying, handling and logistics. One idea is for e-tailers to seek suppliers that are able to store merchandise for the retailer. This would reduce storage expenses. E-tailers could also change the items displayed in their electronic storefront according to their customers' profiles.

Another area to concentrate on is cross selling. Cross-selling or complimentary selling is selling an additional product or service to an existing customer (Kotler & Armstrong 2009). With cross-selling, the company offers the customer a product or service related to whatever they are already buying. This is demonstrated by the waiter asking if you want a salad to go with your main course. Many cross-selling opportunities arise naturally. If you are selling tennis racquets, for example, you can also offer a bag, balls, lessons and accessories. To gain the extra sale, you might simply have to mention that the other products or services are available. The problem in the Egyptian market, and many other developing countries, is that they have low sales of their core products online; let alone complimentary sales. The problem is rooted in the difficulties regarding the creation of accurate customer profiles, considered essential criteria used to augment or supplement an offer, which should appeal to the targeted segment. In addition the lack of trust between providers and customers hinders the implementation of the complimentary selling approach. Another important aspect related to a barrier to adopt complimentary selling is the provider's concern that it may backfire and destroy the company's image. Market research should be undertaken to understand customer needs and determine the most applicable complimentary products.



### 7.8 Grow Integrated Marketing Communication

Many firms are already using some marketing communication channels to deliver messages to their target market. The same message structure and spirit should be used online to ensure consistency in communications. Brand development should be consistent across channels. The Egyptian youth segment is attracted by social networks which are available online; (youtube.com, facebook.com, second life, and myspace.com). This presents a great opportunity for companies to communicate and to interact with their target market.

In Egypt; 18.7% of individuals state they use the Internet for communication purposes. This includes sending and receiving emails, chatting, and Internet phone calls (The Future of Internet Economy in Egypt 2008). Egyptian marketers should use this phenomenon to gain customers engagement and involvement into their promoted brands and to gain the maximum insights regarding their customer's interests and characteristics. The Internet in Egypt may be used to establish high rapport with customers; marketing by permission rather than by incursion. Egyptian companies should look to the Internet as an opportunity to build for themselves, social communication networks that would help them maintain close contact with customers, which will facilitate future online transactions.

### 8. Managerial Implications

E-commerce is still insignificant in Egypt meanwhile online communication is heavily practiced. The insignificance of online shopping in Egypt is due to some cultural concerns. Lack of online security, trust, and privacy issues hinders online shopping activities. Good customer services, offering additional incentives, providing added value activities like customized offers, and cultural adaptation would definitely facilitate e-commerce acceptance in Egypt. Egyptians prefer face to face transactions as opposed to internet activities. This is due to the high uncertainty avoidance rank and the collectivistic nature of Egyptians. These concerns could be handled in websites design and structure. Online activities are appealing more to the Egyptian youth segment than elder generations. We believe that after the Egyptian youth revolution males and females are equally involved in online activities without any digital gap. Providing direct interactions between online providers and customers in the form of chatting or free dialup numbers will contribute positively to online shopping in Egypt. Online vendors should consider the holistic online shopping experience when dealing with Egyptian customers.

### 9. Conclusion

Egypt took full advantage of online communities. Egyptian bloggers managed to build solid relationships through online interactions. The Egyptian facebook revolution represented an opportunity for e-commerce expansion. Egypt has barriers to overcome to gain full advantage of the networked economy. These include lack of trust from the user perspective, censorship and infrastructure weaknesses. Despite these barriers, there is great potential for e-commerce to grow in Egypt. The recommendations posed

## Ramzy, Ogden&Ogden

in this paper will help ensure that Egypt takes full advantage of the future growth of the networked economy.

### 10. Research Limitation

This paper has been conducted immediately after the Egyptian youth revolution which took place in January, 2011. The Internet user profiles and other online activities are increasing tremendously. This point validates the significance of the paper and at the same time limits its practical orientation due to the ongoing increase of user profiles and other online expansion activities.

### 11. Further Research

An empirical investigation for the Egyptian networked economy after the facebook revolution; as well as how digital media changed Egypt as a nation brand are representing an area of potential future research. Effectiveness of social networking as a marketing tool in Egypt and using online communities for building brand equity are very relevant issues to the current Egyptian landscape.

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## Ramzy, Ogden&Ogden

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