

THE ROLE OF BIG TECH IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE: PLATFORMS AS FACILITATORS OF CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE

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Abstract: *This paper explores the pivotal role that major online marketplaces—such as Amazon, Alibaba, and eBay to name a few of them—play in shaping modern trade and e-commerce. It explains how these titans leverage strategic and economic mechanisms to pivot their global dominance while enhancing their global trade efficiency and market integration. Using a mix of methods, this study investigates recent trade data, econometric insights of these companies and industry reports in order to examine their economies of scales, network effects and transaction cost efficiencies. The findings indicate that these companies facilitate significant trade volume growth, with cross-border e-commerce projected to grow at a staggering 25.1% CAGR from 2022 to 2028, driven by platforms balancing buyer-seller ecosystems. The second part of the paper focuses on Amazon as a case study and it outlines how the company's logistical infrastructure and use of AI-driven models have underpinned its sustained global dominance in e-commerce. For instance, the U.S. accounts for roughly 47.5% of Amazon's global site traffic. However, not all impacts have been positive—according to a 2016 inquiry by the European Commission, 38% of surveyed retailers reported being affected by Amazon's restrictive practices and strategies. This raises broader question marks and insecurities about fair competition in digital markets and e-commerce; and such insights are especially valuable for economists and policymakers interested in how digital trade is reshaping global commerce because as this new paradigm evolves, it increasingly challenges long-standing models of international trade and forces a rethinking of competitive dynamics in the digital age.*

Keywords: *international trade; e-commerce; Amazon; AI-driven models.*

JEL Classification: F13; F14; L81; L86; O33

1. Introduction

The transformation of the international trade, and its shift from the traditional paradigms and framework that we already know, to the online, seamless and borderless buying transaction is nowadays a norm; as platforms like Amazon, Alibaba and eBay have made their way into our personal lives and transactional operations. These firms have grown into e-commerce behemoths, serving both the end customer, and the selling entity at the same time, providing them hosting and

networking; helping them into growing and being the e-commerce behemoths that orchestrate a large share of cross-border retail exchanges. Recent industry projections underscore their influence: global cross-border B2C e-commerce merchandise value its forecast to reach roughly \$3 trillion by 2028, growing about 25,1% annually from 2022 to 2028 (Vantage Market Research, 2022). Of course, this explosive growth in e-commerce is not random or accidental, but largely attributed to the scale and reach of major marketplaces, which make it easier for the end customer to discover international products and, or businesses to access global customers.

However, the dominance of these platforms also raises critical concerns over the market power and equitable competition in world trade. Amazon for instance, has established itself as an unparalleled leader in global market, with US alone accounting for almost half its website visits-more accurate 47,5% of worldwide's site visits (SellerSprite, 2024). It's worth mentioning as well that Amazon, through it's Amazon Marketplace hosts millions of third-party sellers and buyers, and exerts significant control over terms of trade. Going to the other side of the world, Alibaba Group through its platforms like Alibaba.com (B2B), Tmall and Taobao (China domestic B2C) and AliExpress (Global B2C) facilitates a massive volume of international transactions, connecting manufacturers and consumers across over 220 countries with 150+ million active global buyers on AliExpress (Joshua, 2023). eBay as well, one of the pioneers of online marketplaces, similarly connects buyers and sellers in over 190 markets (Statista Research Department, 2024).

These firms utilize sophisticated strategies grounded in economic principles to reinforce their market positions – from leveraging economies of scale in logistics and IT infrastructure to harnessing network effects that make their platforms more valuable as more participants join (Durling, 2022). Furthermore, by dramatically reducing transaction costs (e.g. search costs, payment processing, and fulfillment) these marketplaces have such a powerful advantage over traditional channels that some may call it even unfair.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Network Effects and Two-Sided Market

The machinery of cross-border e-commerce hums with network effects, where each new participant-be it a buyer in Amsterdam or a seller in Bangkok-amps up the platform's allure. It works just like a bazaar: The more shoppers swarm up to snap up Korean tech or Italian leather or Turkish kebab, the more vendors pile in, enriching this way the catalog of products and driving down prices through sheer volume. It's a virtuous cycle and the large trade corporations do not just surf this wave; they actually steer it to they liking. By wielding vast databases and real-time analytics, these firms fine-tune their algorithms and strategies to the smallest details, from inventory to shipping routes, ensuring buyers and sellers stay hooked as much as possible to their website, spending as much money as possible. The academic literature (e.g. Rochet & Tirole, 2003; Parker et al., 2016) stresses that once a platform like Amazon or Alibaba achieves a sufficient amount of network size, it gains a competitive moat: its service becomes more useful and convenient than

smaller rivals, thus attracting even more users in a virtuous cycle. As an analysis noted, “*Amazon makes use of economies of scale and network effects to dominate*” the e-commerce sector (Durling, 2022). The network effect “bandwagon” means that as Amazon’s marketplace grew, it became the go-to place for an even larger number of buyers, which in turn compelled more merchants to list their products there, further amplifying Amazon’s reach and popularity (Durling, 2022). In short, we can resemble this effect with the snowball effect aka the compound effect.

2.2 Economies of Scale and Scope

The sheer number of operations of the major marketplaces aforementioned yields significant economies of scale; another classic economic concept relevant to their global dominance. Economies of scale refer to the cost advantages that a business or financial entity obtains due to its expansions; as output increases the average cost of a unit typically decreases. In the context of the studied companies (Amazon, Alibaba, and eBay), scale economies appear in multiple fields, a few of them being procurement, technology infrastructure, logistics, and of course marketing. For example, Amazon’s ability to invest in massive fulfillment centers and cutting-edge automation is supported by the colossal volumes of orders that it processes; the cost per order for warehousing and shipping drops as numbers of order rises. An academic review by Zhu and Liu from 2018 (Zhu and Liu, 2018) observed that Amazon’s continuous reinvestment into its distribution network and IT systems creates a scale-based cost leadership that smaller competition cannot match. Similarly, Alibaba’s e-commerce empire in China benefits from economies of scale in cloud computing (via Alibaba Cloud) and in payments (via Ant Group’s Alipay) that grew symbiotically with its marketplaces – achieving efficiencies in handling billions of transactions with lower marginal transaction costs.

Economies of scope – cost advantages due to a variety of products or businesses – also play a role; let’s take Amazon for example. It operates retail marketplace, cloud services, digital content, and devices (a domain not so profitable as the other ones, but let it be for the sake of the argument), which share data and technological resources between one another, reinforcing their connectivity and the ecosystem. Cusumano et al in 2019 (Cusumano et al., 2019) suggested that this diversification of portfolio allows cross-subsidization and resilience, strengthening Amazon’s overall competitive position against its competitors, who might have just one pillar of Amazon’s diverse portfolio.

From a global trade perspective, the economies of scale of this key player can translate into lower prices and of course improved service levels for international consumers and sellers. Shippers like Alibaba and Amazon, who are able to ship products high volume and cross border negotiate favorable rates with logistics providers, and in some cases, they have even developed their own logistics arms (e.g. Alibaba’s Cainiao network, Amazon’s international shipping and last-mile delivery fleet.) (Logistics Asia, 2021). These scale driven services reduce the logistic costs and delivery times while furthermore they spread fixed costs of regulatory compliance (e.g. customs clearance systems, international returns handling) across many transactions, making it viable to offer services like duties-prepaid shipping or easy international returns; perks that a smaller firm would find way too costly to handle by itself. The net effect, as discussed in trade economics research (Lendle

et al., 2016) is that e-commerce shrinks the distance between countries by utilizing their scale in order to absorb or streamline the economic frictions that exist with traditional trade.

2.3 Platform Strategies and Competition Policy

Finally, the literature review would not be complete if we wouldn't mention about the growing body of work on competition policy and platform regulation as it pertains to major e-commerce marketplaces. As their influence has exponentially grown, so has the diligence of economists, legal scholars and regulators on how these platforms may abuse their dominant positions. Key areas of interest identified in literature and policy reports include: self-preferencing (e.g. A platform favoring its own products or services over third-party sellers on the platform), exclusive dealing or lock in (contractual terms that usually prevent sellers from offering lower prices elsewhere; even on their own platform, or that force use of certain platform services like fulfillment), and data exploitation (e.g. using third-party seller data to compete against those sellers, as alleged in Amazon's case by the EU).

For instance, the European Commission's preliminary findings in its E-commerce Sector Inquiry (2016) raised concerns about the dual role of marketplaces, that act both as a platform but also as a rival seller, noting a potential conflict of interests when a platform operator competes with its own business users (Leprince-Ringuet, 2020). Scholars like Ezrachi & Stucke (2016) have theorized the concept of "algorithmic collusion" and "super platforms" to describe how a few digital marketplaces might entrench their powers in ways that have not been seen nor studied in the traditional markets, possibly necessitating updated competition policy tools.

In summary, the literature presented above provides a multifaceted understanding: online marketplaces reduce existing trade frictions and enhance global e-commerce by leveraging network effects and scale, but those same factors can also lead to outsized market power and monopolistic regimes that poses challenges for competition and policy. This dual perspective sets the stage for examining empirical findings on how Amazon, Alibaba, eBay and others, operate internationally; as we shall see further below.

3. Amazon Case Study

3.1 International Operations and Strategy

Amazon started in the United States in 1995 and by the early 2000s began its international expansions – launching marketplaces in Europe (UK and Germany 1998, France in 2000), Asia (Japan 2000, China 2004, India 2013) and beyond (DePillis & Sherman, 2021). To this day, Amazon has consumer retail websites in Europe, Asia, America, and the Middle East, and serves customers in even more countries via cross-border delivery. It's worth noting also that Amazon's global strategy is to emphasize the market integration and consistency; it strives to offer a similar user experience (in terms of perks for the Prime membership benefits, website user interface, seller platform) across all market, be it Europe, America, Asia, or the Middle East, while simultaneously tailoring to local preferences (for

example integrating local payment methods and curating region-specific product selections; as the products that are popular in USA are not popular in India for example).

3.2 Economies of scale & scope in procurement and logistics

One key strategic mechanism that Amazon uses is the tremendous economies of scale in procurement and logistics that allow the company to enter new markets aggressively. Usually, when Amazon enters a country, it invests heavily in infrastructure – usually operating at a loss for initial years – leveraging its global capital and technology. For instance, in India Amazon reportedly invested over \$6.5 billion in the first 5-6 years of operations in order to build warehouses, last-mile delivery service and to underwrite discounts and free shipping to acquire new customers (Times of India Team, 2020). These economies of scale mean Amazon can endure the costs that local retailers cannot even dream of supporting. Over time, as volume grows, Amazon achieves lower unit costs in that market.

Economies of scope also play a tremendous role in Amazon's International Expansion. Services like Fulfillment by Amazon (FBA), where Amazon handles warehouses and logistics for third-party sellers, were originally developed in the US but are rolled out globally and of course these spread the development cost of such services and provides a uniform high standard of logistics to sellers worldwide. As a result, a seller in Italy, or Russia benefits from the same service to store and ship products just like an American seller, even though they are on different continents; gaining the benefits of using Amazon's world-class logistics system in their own market. This integration of services and platforms across borders attracts both sellers – as they get consistent and reliable delivery performance - and buyers who gain easy logistics solutions and top-notch platform and services under the Amazon's logo.

3.3 AI-Driven Logistics

Amazon's supply chain is a showcase of how artificial intelligence and automation can be used to handle global operations efficiently – or better put, in a more efficient way than humans can. The firm employs AI and machine learning in order to demand forecast, inventory placement, and route optimization on a massive scale; and a concrete example is Amazon's use of AI for predictive demand forecasting during peak seasons: during a recent holiday season (cyber Monday 2023), Amazon's AI systems forecasted demand of 400 million products and prepositioned their inventory in the warehouses closer to anticipated buyers based on their reserves of historical data (Sifted Team, 2024). This kind of predictive logistic is on one hand scary for sure, but one on the other hand particularly beneficial for cross-border fulfillment – by anticipating that a certain product from a Chinese seller will see high demand in Brazil, for instance, Amazon can proactively ship inventory to its Brazil fulfillment center, cutting in this way delivery times for the customers.

Additionally, Amazon has deployed two models of AI robots, the first being Kiva in 2012 which is a transportation robot equipped with an AI model, and an autonomous robotic arm named Sequoia in 2022, that have significantly sped up the order processing. The Sequoia system alone can store and retrieve inventory by a 75% faster than the previous system, contributing to way faster dispatch times.

Through a customized inventory management system that organizes deliveries, Amazon was able to reduce human effort and employee injury by 15% and slash the processing time by 25%. Now, what do the above numbers mean for Amazon? The system ensured that the products ordered on Cyber Monday were delivered much faster. In 2020 alone, Amazon was able to use machine learning and AI to save \$1.6 billion in transportation and logistics costs and reduce their 1 million tons of CO2 emissions (Sifted Team, 2024). These figures highlight how the constant reinvestment strategy of Amazon has led them being a leader in the e-commerce market, thing achieved via scale and advanced technology, and it underscores how smaller rivals would unlikely have the financial ability to match Amazon's capability due to heavy fixed costs and data requirements involved in the processes.

3.4 Market Integration

Amazon also integrates different markets by encouraging cross-border transactions within its ecosystem. For example, European Amazon marketplaces (UK, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Netherlands, Sweden, Poland) are largely integrated in the ecosystem, meaning that a seller can easily sell in all the other EU countries by using Amazon's platform and the firm is offering unified logistics and even automatic translating listings. This integration basically creates a regional single market for e-commerce under Amazon's auspices, ahead of what regulatory harmonization alone achieved.

In a similar way, Amazon's global seller program allows (primary) Chinese manufacturers to sell directly on all Amazon's sites, and by 2021 reports suggested that almost 50% of the top Amazon Marketplace sellers in the US were actually based in China. This reflects Amazon's integration of Chinese export supply into its platform. (In the graph shown below, we can also see a decline in the Chinese sellers, but that's due to Amazon's closure of certain accounts, due to not following COVID-19 regulations (Kaziukenas, 2024).



Figure 2: Percent of Top Amazon sellers based in China
Source: <https://www.marketplacepulse.com/articles/amazons-significant-reliance-on-chinese-sellers>

For consumers, Amazon offers option like Amazon global Store, where consumers in countries without an Amazon local store (or even with one) can import products from all over the world, with Amazon handling all the logistic and legal duties and providing a landed cost calculation to the customer.

This is a twofold win for Amazon. On one hand, it expands Amazon's sales beyond the confines of a local inventory and secondly, it further reinforces network effects by linking country marketplaces and integrating them into one platform. Imagine a customer from Australia, that before Amazon opened in Australia he could easily buy from Amazon US; once Amazon Australia launched, the already established trust and habits transferred to Amazon Australia, making Amazon's entry easier in the Australian Market.

3.5 Competitive Behavior and Anti-Competitive Concerns

Amazon's rise has not been without the very well-known controversies, especially regarding the strategies it uses and how they affect the other competitors and the sellers. One of them, is the dual role that Amazon plays, as both the marketplace operator and retailer. In a more detailed manner, Amazon sells products itself in a first-party manner, as a traditional retailer would, while simultaneously also hosting third party sellers. This arrangement has not been left without accusations on Amazon, as it may favor its own products or also might leverage its control on the platform to the detriment of the other independent sellers; an issue that touches on both fairness and competition law.

In 2016, the European Commission launched an inquiry into e-commerce which among many other aspects gathered also information on marketplace dynamics in the EU. Finding from that inquiry and subsequent investigations have turned on the light on Amazon's impact on the market. For instance, the Commission preliminary found that Amazon systematically used private data from third-party retailers, such as volumes and pricing, to inform Amazon's own sales strategy, giving this way itself an unfair advantage (Petrov, 2020). This kind of behavior would be a clear abuse of dominance under EU competition law if confirmed, as it exploits access to not-private data not available to competitors. Amazon has faced formal antitrust charges in the EU on this matter since that, resulting in commitments in late 2022 to change some of its practices. Some of these commitments included among others the ceasing of use of non-public marketplace seller data for its own retail operations (European Commission, 2022).

Another contentious strategy of Amazon was the use of price parity clauses; also known as „most-favored-nation” clause, in contracts with sellers, which prohibited sellers from offering their products at lower prices on any other platform; including their own websites. Many critics have argued that this strategy stifled competition by preventing rival marketplaces or independents sellers from competing on price and the worst of all, it locked sellers into Amazon's fee structure. European regulators pressured Amazon into removing such clauses around 2013, and Amazon obliged to this pressure by 2019, and it did so worldwide under regulatory scrutiny. This absence of price competition due to the before-mentioned clauses was cited as one of the factors that “negatively affected” retailers' ability to compete outside the Amazon's ecosystem (Leprince-Ringuet, 2020).

The survey data from Europe provides quantification of Amazon's perceived impact on sellers. In one European Commission inquiry in 2016 a significant amount of retailers reported that they were adversely impacted by the large marketplace's tactics. In fact, 38% of online retailers surveyed indicated that Amazon's strategies have negatively affected their businesses (Leprince-Ringuet, 2020). This may happen as being undercut by Amazon's own products, feeling coerced to join Amazon to reach more customers (even if it means that they had to surrender margin through fees) or having to abide by Amazon's strict terms and strategies that can also change abruptly, in other words, Amazon holds all the cards.

An EU sector report also noted that many retailers voiced concerns that their dependency on dominant platforms could be exploited, for example, sudden changes in search ranked algorithms or fee increases on Amazon can "make or break" small merchants, reflecting a huge power imbalance (European Commission, 2017). The House Judiciary Committee Investigation in the US (2020) similarly documented numerous third-party sellers who described Amazon's marketplace as a "gatekeeper" that can impose exorbitant fees and require use of services like FBA, effectively taxing and controlling their businesses (U.S. House Subcommittee on Antitrust, 2020). These competitive concerns about Amazon, illustrate how the platform's economic strategies; while immensely successful in scaling the business, pose huge challenges for fair competition and should be regulated.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the Amazon case study encapsulated how a dominant marketplace operates internationally: by combining a massive investment in scale (logistics, AI, global reach) with network-driven platform growth (third-party seller ecosystem), Amazon has increased efficiency in global trade but has also gathered significant market and decisional power.

This article's examination, grounded in economic theory and backed up by recent data, leads to several key conclusions:

1. Enhanced Trade Efficiency and Access: Online marketplaces have undeniably lowered the barriers and difficulties to cross border commerce, and they did this by leveraging economies of scale, sophisticated logistics and network effects, in order to connect sellers and buyers worldwide with an unprecedented ease.
2. Dominance through strategic mechanisms: The leading marketplaces have achieved their dominance through deliberate strategic use of scale and network advantages, and the detailed Amazon case study explained how investing in AI-driven models for inventory and logistics and integrating services across multiple markets gave Amazon a global competitive edge. Amazon's consolidation of nearly half of US online commerce and Alibaba's command of the Chinese e-commerce market show that dominance once achieved can be durable.
3. Challenges to Fair Competition: With great market power comes great responsibility – and concern. This article highlighted the substantial need of regulations in order to ensure that these e-commerce behemoths do not abuse their intermediary position to foreclose competition or unfairly extract value from dependent sellers. The fact that a significant amount of retailers reported negative

impacts from Amazon's tactics underlines that the success of these platforms can come with a cost to the traditional market structures, business livelihoods and on top of all, fair competition; if they are not regulated.

4. Global impact and Cooperation: Finally, it's more than clear that major marketplaces have become global actors on the trade game and their impact goes beyond country borders. Thus, ensuring fair global trade in the age of digital platforms and artificial intelligence will require international cooperation. Huge issues, like data privacy, digital taxation, counterfeit product and competition law in digital markets are discussed in multi-national forums (G20, OECD) with the recognition that unilateral approaches have limits and the policies that need to be adopted can have ripple effects if not adopted on a worldwide scheme. On the other hand, this also creates an opportunity for harmonizing best practices that protect consumers and sellers without fragmenting the digital market unnecessarily.

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