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MEASURING THE USE OF E-COMMERCE TOOLS IN SMALL BUSINESSES: AN INDEX-BASED ASSESSMENT AND DIFFERENTIATED DEVELOPMENT TRAJECTORIES FOR FOOTWEAR ENTERPRISES IN UZBEKISTAN

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Исследование посвящено разработке методики комплексной оценки уровня использования инструментов электронной коммерции субъектами малого бизнеса и её апробации на предприятиях обувной отрасли Узбекистана. Анализ отрасли за 2020–2024 гг. показал, что число предприятий выросло в 7,1 раза (с 560 до 4 000), тогда как объём производства обуви — в 2,9 раза; в результате средний объём выпуска на одно предприятие сократился с 125,9 до 51,3 тыс. пар, а источник конкурентного преимущества малых фирм сместился от производственной мощности к каналам сбыта. Предложен индекс использования инструментов электронной коммерции (ETVI, 0–100 баллов), включающий пять равновесных блоков (каналы продаж, социальная торговля и цифровой маркетинг, электронные платежи, работа с клиентами и аналитика, логистика и интеграция каналов) и 20 проверяемых индикаторов, а также пятиуровневая шкала цифровой активности. Апробация на ООО «CLASICA SHOES INTERNATIONAL» (KFK-SHOES) и семейном предприятии «ZOLUSHKA STYLE» дала значения ETVI 57 и 44 балла (средний уровень). При этом доля онлайн-



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продаж у крупного производителя составляет лишь 3,2 %, а у малого предприятия — 30,3 %: наличие инструментов не превращается автоматически в результат, решающим фактором является интенсивность их использования. Блок работы с клиентами и аналитики оказался наиболее слабым у обоих предприятий (7 из 20 баллов), что указывает на системную слабость отрасли. На этой основе разработаны дифференцированная матрица цифрового развития с тремя траекториями (6–12, 12–18 и 18–36 месяцев) и пятиэтапный замкнутый организационно-экономический механизм совершенствования использования инструментов электронной коммерции.

Ключевые слова: электронная коммерция, малый бизнес, индекс цифровой активности, цифровая трансформация, обувная промышленность, маркетплейс, Узбекистан.

ABSTRACT

This study develops a composite methodology for assessing how intensively small businesses use e-commerce tools and tests it on footwear enterprises in Uzbekistan. Sector analysis for 2020–2024 shows that the number of enterprises grew 7.1-fold (from 560 to 4,000) while footwear output grew only 2.9-fold; average output per enterprise therefore fell from 125.9 to 51.3 thousand pairs, and the source of competitive advantage for small firms shifted from production capacity to sales channels. The proposed e-commerce tool utilisation index (ETVI, 0–100 points) comprises five equally weighted blocks — sales channels; social commerce and digital marketing; electronic payments; customer management and analytics; and logistics and channel integration — measured by 20 verifiable indicators, together with a five-level scale of digital activity. Testing



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at CLASICA SHOES INTERNATIONAL LLC (KFK-SHOES) and the family enterprise ZOLUSHKA STYLE yields ETVI scores of 57 and 44 points (medium level). Yet the online share of sales is only 3.2% at the large producer and 30.3% at the small firm: the availability of tools does not automatically translate into results, and the decisive factor is the intensity of their use. The customer management and analytics block is the weakest at both firms (7 of 20 points), indicating a systemic weakness of the sector. On this basis, a differentiated digital development matrix with three trajectories (6–12, 12–18 and 18–36 months) and a five-stage closed-loop organisational and economic mechanism for improving the use of e-commerce tools are proposed.

Keywords: e-commerce, small business, digital activity index, digital transformation, footwear industry, marketplace, Uzbekistan.

INTRODUCTION

Small businesses are the most numerous participants in Uzbekistan's economy. As of 1 October 2025 the country had 1,212 thousand operating small business entities, together with 733,052 individual business entities, including 281,861 individual entrepreneurs, 5,841 family businesses and 22,100 artisans. This gives e-commerce a very broad potential user base. However, no official statistics show how many of these entities actually use digital sales channels, and the most common proxy — the share of online sales — measures the outcome rather than its causes.

The infrastructure needed for e-commerce is already in place. Internet penetration reached 94.2% of the population in January–August 2025; the number of mobile connections (33.9 million in 2024) exceeds the number of internet users; electronic payments rose from UZS 28 trillion in 2020 to more than UZS 185



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trillion in 2024; and the e-commerce market grew from USD 0.20 billion in 2020 to USD 1.2 billion in 2024. Marketplaces such as Uzum Market, Wildberries.uz and Olcha.uz, payment systems such as Click, Payme, Uzum Bank and Paynet, and marketplace fulfilment services are all accessible to a micro-enterprise within days or weeks. The lag of small businesses in digital trade is therefore explained not by the absence of tools but by the level and quality of their use.

The leather and footwear industry illustrates why this matters. Between 2020 and 2024 the number of enterprises in the sector grew far faster than output, so the average firm's market share shrank sharply. In such conditions a small firm cannot compete on price, because economies of scale remain with large producers; its advantage shifts to the sales channel, direct contact with the customer and brand differentiation — exactly the functions provided by e-commerce tools. At the same time, 60.6% of surveyed consumers already buy footwear online to some degree, whereas for many producers the online channel remains secondary and episodic. This imbalance between demand-side readiness and supply-side activity is the sector's main digital reserve.

The existing literature offers opportunities for further work. Digital maturity models are mostly designed for large corporations and rely on internal data that outside researchers cannot access; single indicators do not show which part of the sales chain is weak; and few studies translate an assessment into a firm-specific development path. This study addresses these gaps by asking three questions: how can the level of e-commerce tool use in a small business be measured in a comparable and verifiable way; what does such a measurement reveal about footwear enterprises of different size; and how should development priorities differ by level of digital activity. The paper contributes a five-block index with 20 verifiable indicators, tests it on two contrasting enterprises, and proposes a differentiated development matrix and a five-stage implementation mechanism.



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LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the digital development of firms has evolved from studying the adoption of single technologies to assessing digital transformation as a whole. Rogers (2003) explains adoption as a staged diffusion process in which the perceived advantage, compatibility and complexity of an innovation determine how fast it spreads; small firms typically join later and adopt tools selectively. Westerman, Bonnet and McAfee (2014) distinguish between digital intensity (what technologies a firm uses) and transformation management intensity (how it organises their use), showing that value comes only when both are high. Sahut and Lissillour (2023) confirm in a systematic review that digital transformation changes work organisation and requires capabilities beyond technology purchase. The functional content of e-commerce has been structured by Zwass (1996), Chaffey (2009) and Laudon and Traver (2021), who describe a chain of tools covering storefronts and marketplaces, digital marketing, electronic payments, customer relationship management and fulfilment. Verhoef, Kannan and Inman (2015) add that in modern retail these channels must be integrated into an omnichannel model rather than run in parallel. Platform economics (Rochet and Tirole, 2004) and transaction cost economics (Williamson, 1979) explain why marketplaces are attractive to small sellers: they provide ready payment, storage, delivery and audience infrastructure that a small firm could not build on its own, at the price of commission and dependence on the platform.

Measuring digital activity raises methodological questions. Kaplan and Norton (1996) show that a single financial indicator cannot capture performance and that balanced, multi-dimensional measurement is needed for management decisions. The OECD and JRC handbook on composite indicators (2008) sets out the principles of indicator selection, normalisation and weighting, noting that equal weights are appropriate when there is no empirical or theoretical basis for



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differentiation. International organisations (OECD, 2021; UNCTAD, 2024; World Bank, 2025) report that small firms in emerging markets lag in digitalisation mainly because of limited skills, logistics costs and weak data use rather than lack of access.

In Uzbekistan, S.S. Gulyamov, R.H. Ayupov, G.R. Baltabayeva, A.T. Kenjabayev, M.Yu. Jumaniyozova, D.S. Qosimova and T.G'. Nutfulloyev have studied the theoretical foundations of the digital economy, e-business and small business development. However, a verifiable, firm-level instrument for measuring e-commerce tool use by small businesses, and a link from such measurement to differentiated development paths, has not yet been developed, particularly for the footwear sector. This study fills that gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study combines economic-statistical analysis of the footwear sector, a composite index of e-commerce tool use, and an in-depth comparative case study of two enterprises. Sector indicators for 2020–2024 were compiled from the Statistics Agency, the Central Bank, the "O'zcharmsanoat" association and international sources. Growth dynamics are summarised with the compound annual growth rate:

$$CAGR = \left(\frac{X_{2024}}{X_{2020}} \right)^{1/4} - 1$$

The core instrument is the e-commerce tool utilisation index (ETVI), built on four principles: multidimensionality, weighting, measurability and comparability. It is calculated as follows:

$$ETVI_i = \sum_{j=1}^m w_j S_{ij}, \quad \sum_{j=1}^m w_j = 1$$

where $ETVI_i$ is the index of enterprise i (0–100 points); S_{ij} is the score of enterprise i in block j ; w_j is the weight of block j ; and $m = 5$ is the number of blocks. The blocks follow the full sales chain, and each contains four indicators



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scored from 0 to 5, so the maximum is 20 points per block and 100 points overall (Table 1).

Table 1. Indicator system of the e-commerce tool utilisation index (ETVI)¹

Block	Indicators (0–5 points each)	Examples of scoring criteria	Max.
1. Sales channels	Marketplace presence; own online store; mobile app; product card quality	None – 0; one platform – 2; two – 4; three or more – 5	20
2. Social commerce and digital marketing	Active social channels; content regularity; paid advertising; live streams and influencer partnerships	Less than monthly – 1; weekly – 3; three or more times a week – 5	20
3. Electronic payments	Online payment systems; buy now, pay later (BNPL); online cash register and fiscal receipt; payment security and refund procedure	None – 0; via marketplace only – 3; directly connected – 5	20
4. Customer management and analytics	CRM or customer database; chatbot; loyalty programme; analytics and KPI monitoring	None – 0; manual list – 2; CRM system – 5	20
5. Logistics and channel integration	Delivery options; order tracking; clarity of return policy; online–offline integration	Not announced – 0; general – 2; with terms and procedure – 5	20
ETVI	20 indicators	–	100

¹ Source: Developed by the author.

Equal weights ($w_j = 0.20$) were adopted for three reasons. First, every stage of the sales chain is necessary, and a break at any stage reduces the efficiency of the whole chain, so there is no theoretical basis for ranking the blocks. Second, differentiated weights would require an expert survey beyond the scope of the



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study. Third, equal weights make the results reproducible and easy for other researchers to verify (OECD and JRC, 2008). Indicators were selected by three criteria: they can be verified by external observation or company documents, they have practical meaning for a small business, and they correspond to the functional classification of e-commerce tools. Indicators requiring internal financial data were deliberately excluded, as such data are often unavailable to an outside assessor.

On the basis of the index value, enterprises are assigned to one of five levels of digital activity (Table 2).

Table 2. Scale of e-commerce tool utilisation levels²

ETVI	Level	Description
0–20	Very low	Digital trade practically absent; tools used episodically and unsystematically
21–40	Low	One or two tools, usually a single social channel; no links between blocks
41–60	Medium	Main channels exist, but customer management and analytics are weak
61–80	High	All blocks function; channels partly integrated; analytics maintained
81–100	Very high	Full omnichannel model, data-driven management, automation

² Source: Developed by the author.

The index was tested on two enterprises operating in the same consumer segment but differing in size, legal form and sales model: CLASICA SHOES INTERNATIONAL LLC (KFK-SHOES brand; Andijan region; founded 2010; over 500 employees; capacity up to 4,500 pairs a day) and the family enterprise ZOLUSHKA STYLE (Tashkent, Olmazor district; founded 2013; 10 employees;



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officially registered as a small business). This contrast provides convenient analytical conditions for observing how e-commerce tools relate to firm results. Each indicator was scored from the firms' public channels, platform pages and company information.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Table 3 summarises the main indicators of Uzbekistan's footwear industry. Footwear output grew from 70.5 to 205.2 million pairs between 2020 and 2024 (CAGR = 30.6%), but growth was uneven: above 60% a year in 2021–2022, 29.7% in 2023, and a 16.7% contraction in 2024. The decline signals that growth based on quantitative expansion is exhausted and that competition in the domestic market has intensified. Meanwhile, leather and leather goods production continued to grow in 2024, indicating a reallocation of resources within the sector.

Table 3. Main indicators of Uzbekistan's footwear industry, 2020–2024³

Indicator	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	CAGR, %
Footwear output, mn pairs	70.5	115.0	190.0	246.4	205.2	30.6
Leather products, bn sq. dm	1.26	1.60	2.10	2.47	2.71	21.1
Leather goods, UZS bn	70.1	95.0	125.0	153.7	166.9	24.2
Number of enterprises	560	900	2,500	3,500	4,000	63.5
Output per enterprise, thousand pairs	125.9	127.8	76.0	70.4	51.3	–20.1
Exports, USD mn	260	320	460	480	600	23.3
Share in total exports, %	3.5	4.2	5.1	5.6	6.0	–
Export destinations, countries	12	18	28	40	45	39.2
Foreign investment projects	105	130	155	170	181	14.6
Foreign investment, USD mn	187.6	210.0	235.0	252.0	265.1	9.0

³ Source: Compiled and calculated by the author based on data from the Statistics Agency and the "O'zcharmsanoat" association.



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The most important structural change is the sharp rise in the number of enterprises: 7.1-fold over the period, including a jump from 900 to 2,500 in 2022 alone. Because the number of firms grew much faster than output, average output per enterprise fell 2.5-fold, from 125.9 to 51.3 thousand pairs. The sector's structure has shifted from large producers towards small and medium-sized firms, and average investment per project declined from USD 1.79 million to USD 1.46 million, confirming the entry of smaller projects. For small firms, the decisive factor is therefore no longer production capacity but the effective organisation of channels that bring the product to the end consumer. Exports grew from USD 260 million to USD 600 million and now reach 45 countries, but they are generated mainly by large firms and contract manufacturing; for small firms the cheapest route abroad — international marketplaces — remains largely unused.

The two case enterprises represent fundamentally different models. KFK-SHOES relies on production capacity, a network of branded stores and wholesale buyers; its digital channels include seller pages on Uzum Market and Yandex Market and the kfk.uz website, which presents a catalogue and accepts orders. ZOLUSHKA STYLE sells mainly through Telegram and Instagram: products are presented regularly in photo and video format, orders are taken through direct messages and delivered by courier, marketplace presence is episodic, and payment is accepted through Payme and Click (Table 4).

Table 4. Comparative use of e-commerce tools at the case enterprises⁴

Tool	KFK-SHOES	ZOLUSHKA STYLE
Marketplace	Permanent presence on Uzum Market and Yandex Market	None
Online store	kfk.uz – catalogue and orders	None
Mobile app	Via marketplace app	None
Social commerce	Instagram and Telegram, low activity	Telegram and Instagram, main sales channel



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Tool	KFK-SHOES	ZOLUSHKA STYLE
Digital marketing	Episodic targeted advertising	Regular content, episodic paid advertising
Electronic payment	Payme, Click, Uzum Bank	Payme and Click
BNPL	Indirectly, via marketplace	None
Customer database and chatbot	Manually kept list	Direct contact via Telegram, not automated
Analytics	Marketplace seller dashboard data	Simple sales volume records
Logistics	Marketplace fulfilment and own store network	Courier service and pick-up

⁴ Source: Developed by the author based on company information.

Table 5 reports the ETVI scores. Both enterprises fall into the medium level: the large producer scores 57 points and the small firm 44 points, at the lower boundary of the level.

Table 5. ETVI results by enterprise, points⁵

Block	KFK-SHOES	ZOLUSHKA STYLE	Maximum	Difference
1. Sales channels	12	5	20	+7
2. Social commerce and digital marketing	10	14	20	-4
3. Electronic payments	14	9	20	+5
4. Customer management and analytics	7	7	20	0
5. Logistics and channel integration	14	9	20	+5
ETVI (total)	57	44	100	+13
Level	Medium	Medium (lower boundary)	—	—
Online share of sales, 2025, %	3.2	30.3	—	-27.1 p.p.

⁵ Source: Calculated by the author.



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The distribution of points across blocks differs fundamentally. The large producer leads in sales channels, payments and logistics, while the small firm leads only in social commerce and digital marketing. A deeper look reveals a regularity: KFK-SHOES's high scores are concentrated in blocks that the marketplace supplies ready-made — payment and logistics. These tools are the result of connecting to a platform rather than of the firm's own initiative. In the blocks that require the firm's own active effort — social commerce, content and customer management — its results are much lower. At ZOLUSHKA STYLE the picture is reversed: it makes little use of platform capabilities but is highly active in the channel it fully controls.

This leads to the main result of the comparison. Although the large producer is 13 points ahead in tool coverage, its online share of sales is almost ten times lower than that of the small firm (3.2% against 30.3%). The availability of e-commerce tools therefore does not automatically translate into economic results; the decisive factor is not the number of tools but the intensity of their use. For a small business with limited resources, deep and regular work in one or two channels yields more than shallow coverage of all blocks at once. The customer management and analytics block shows the same low result at both firms (7 of 20 points), which indicates a systemic weakness of the sector and, because it is the cheapest block to strengthen, the most universal priority.

Since firms at different levels need different actions, a uniform set of recommendations is ineffective: a complex solution is premature for a low-level firm, while basic advice comes too late for a high-level one. The ETVI level is therefore used to assign each firm to one of three development trajectories (Table 6).



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Table 6. Differentiated digital development matrix for small businesses⁶

ETVI level	Trajectory	Priority block	Main actions	Expected result	Period
Low (0–40)	Basic digitalisation	Sales channels and social commerce	Run one channel regularly; connect electronic payment; prepare quality product cards; no marketplace entry yet	A regular flow of online orders	6–12 months
Medium (41–60)	Channel expansion and customer retention	Customer management and analytics	Step-by-step marketplace entry; size system and product video; customer database and bot; analysis of return reasons	Lower return rate, more repeat purchases	12–18 months
High (61–100)	Integration and export	Channel integration	Full omnichannel integration; deeper analytics; direct BNPL; international platforms	Higher average order value and customer lifetime value	18–36 months

⁶ Source: Developed by the author.

Marketplace entry is not recommended at the low level: without ready content and logistics, entry ends in low ratings and negative reviews, platform algorithms push low-rated sellers down in search results, and correcting this later costs more than the initial entry. Although both case firms are at the medium level, their weak blocks differ: for KFK-SHOES the priority is to activate its own channels, because marketplace presence brings volume but no loyal customer base; for ZOLUSHKA STYLE it is to expand the sales channel block by complementing high social media activity with marketplace presence and systematic payment solutions.



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To turn the matrix into practice, a five-stage organisational and economic mechanism is proposed. Its stages form a closed cycle, and each has a measurable result indicator and a known risk with a mitigating measure (Table 7).

Table 7. Five-stage mechanism for improving the use of e-commerce tools⁷

Stage	Content	Result indicator	Main risk	Mitigation
1. Diagnosis	Digital activity assessed across five blocks with ETVI	Total score and block distribution	Self-assessment inflates scores	Documentary or observational proof for each indicator; external adviser
2. Prioritisation	Weak block, demand factors and cost capacity cross-checked	Selected priority solution and its rationale	Most visible problem chosen, not most important	Apply all three criteria together; record the rationale in writing
3. Implementation	Solution implemented with result, deadline, owner and budget	Plan completion rate	Several directions at once, none completed	One solution per cycle; owner named personally
4. Measuring results	Economic effect compared with a base period or control group	Additional profit, ROI, return rate	No baseline recorded, so effect cannot be measured	Record baseline values before starting; control group for seasonality
5. Re-assessment	Index recalculated, growth recorded, new priority set	Index growth and new weak block	Cycle not completed, becomes a one-off	Fix the re-assessment date in advance; review results with management

⁷ Source: Developed by the author.



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The mechanism is supported at three levels: the enterprise carries out the cycle; the sector association ("O'zcharmsanoat") organises assessment coverage, content and size standards and training; and the state provides statistical monitoring, partial compensation of platform entry costs and export support. The association level carries the main load, because state measures are too broad to reflect sector-specific needs, while individual firms lack the resources to create shared infrastructure.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper proposes and tests a composite methodology for measuring how small businesses use e-commerce tools. The analysis of Uzbekistan's footwear industry for 2020–2024 shows that the number of enterprises grew 7.1-fold while output grew 2.9-fold, so average output per firm fell 2.5-fold and competitive advantage for small firms has shifted from production capacity to sales channels. The ETVI index, built on five equally weighted blocks and 20 verifiable indicators, makes it possible to compare firms of different size on one scale and to identify the weak block of each.

Testing on two contrasting enterprises produced three findings. First, both firms are at the medium level (57 and 44 points), but their profiles are mirror images: the large producer's points come mainly from capabilities supplied by marketplaces, while the small firm's come from the channel it controls itself. Second, tool coverage does not determine results: the firm with 13 fewer points has an online share of sales almost ten times higher (30.3% against 3.2%), so the intensity of tool use matters more than their number. Third, the customer management and analytics block is equally weak at both firms (7 of 20 points), making it a systemic weakness of the sector and the most universal priority.



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On this basis the following suggestions are made:

1. The ETVI methodology should be used by the "O'zcharsanoat" association and regional business support bodies for regular (semi-annual) assessment of member enterprises, so that support measures are targeted at each firm's weak block.
2. Development recommendations should follow the differentiated matrix: basic digitalisation for low-level firms (6–12 months), channel expansion and customer retention for medium-level firms (12–18 months), and integration and export for high-level firms (18–36 months).
3. Small firms should strengthen the customer management and analytics block first — a customer database, an automated messaging channel and analysis of return reasons — since it shows the lowest scores and requires the least expenditure.
4. Large producers should activate their own channels (social commerce, content, direct customer contact) instead of relying solely on marketplace presence, which brings volume but not a loyal customer base.
5. Improvement should be organised as a five-stage closed cycle with one solution per cycle, baseline values recorded before implementation and a fixed date for re-assessment.
6. The Statistics Agency, together with the sector association, should introduce statistical monitoring of digital sales channel use by small businesses, which is currently absent.

The study has limitations. Scoring contains an element of expert judgement, and some indicators, such as product card quality, leave room for subjective interpretation. The index measures the availability and quality of tool use but not directly their conversion into economic results. Equal weights do not reflect possible differences in the real economic importance of the blocks. The



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methodology was tested on two enterprises, so the observed regularity between tool coverage and online sales share needs to be verified on a wider sample. Future research could differentiate the weights using expert assessment or principal component analysis, apply the index to a representative sample of footwear and light industry enterprises, and link ETVI scores econometrically to firm-level financial outcomes.

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