



Women in F-commerce: a booming sector for women empowerment in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

F-commerce (Facebook and commerce) is the key mechanism today for empowerment of women in a digital platform. Nowadays, Facebook is not only a medium of social contact, but also a booming sector for women in conducting online business. This study aims at exploring the benefits of F-commerce as a new digital platform by which women empowerment can be enhanced. The study also considers the integrated digital platform F-commerce to be utilized for online business activities to assess the economic empowerment of women in Bangladesh. Further it aims to explore the measures to accelerate online business activities as well as increase empowerment which can create a successful F-commerce marketplace. This study is mainly depended on qualitative and descriptive analysis. Both primary and secondary sources of information are collected. The primary data derived from the open-ended interactive virtual interviews of women who operate online business using the digital platform F-commerce. Available books, journals, documents, newspaper, data, report and magazine articles are reviewed in detail as a secondary source of information. The research findings revealed ultimate results for the benefits, and opportunities, challenges and way forward measures in the F-commerce sector for enhancing empowerment of women. This study also finds out the reasons behind women's participation and barriers they have to face in F-commerce.

INTRODUCTION

F-Commerce, the term is derived from the words Facebook and commerce. It refers to the buying and selling of goods or services through Facebook. The benefit of such digital platform is that one can start business with little capital and without a business store or showroom as well as staying at home.

Empowerment of women is the stern attention in today's world. In Bangladesh, women empowerment through F-commerce as a booming sector and a new digital platform is the burning issue in the context of empowerment (Hossain, (2020). At present the whole world is observing a tremendous transition in online business, and Bangladesh is also a part of such global trend (Islam, 2020). The concept women in online business is developed dramatically with the basic idea that F-commerce as a booming sector for

women empowerment regarding earning power and dignity (Jan and Shar, 2008). F-commerce is contributing more to rapid growth of the digital market in this country (Maimuna, 2020). In Bangladesh, there are many women who cannot work outside the home, but they want to be self-sufficient. Today, F-commerce has provided the opportunity to become self-reliant by doing business staying at home using Facebook.

As a third world and densely populated country Bangladesh faces the dilemma of providing adequate employment opportunities specially for women. F-commerce has created this easier opportunity to be employed in both social and commercial perspective. Women are now engaged in multiple online businesses staying at home with the taking care of their families (Aditi, 2019).

Empowerment of women means the improvement of women's status. Economic solvency is the

prime concern in this issue. While a woman becomes financially empowered, she gains social and familial value and dignity as well.

Nowadays, women are the most active users in F-commerce, and they have a lot of employment opportunities with online business. However, facebook is not just a social media of communication, but a popular means of online business as well (Prova, 2020). In Bangladesh, Facebook is a very common social media network. Women can easily start a business venture staying at home using Facebook page or group (Aditi, 2019). F-commerce gives the scope to new woman entrepreneurs to become self-reliant by conducting online business (Tabassum, 2018). Though women have gained various opportunities from such booming sector to be empowered, they are facing multiple challenges too (Haque, 2013). Therefore the present study was aimed

This study mainly aims at exploring the benefits and opportunities of F-commerce for economic empowerment of women, to identify the challenges for women to conduct online business using F-commerce and to provide necessary measures in curbing emerging challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This study is confined to the women owned online business through F-commerce platform in Bangladesh. Most of the respondents of this study were housewives and the rest were student entrepreneurs. Most of them were involved in clothing business. Selected women owners operated their Facebook page with a distinct profile name to run their business. Such as- La Rosa fashion, Shajghor, Sourabina craft, Mayaboti, Fashion Prangon, Live Collection by Jasia etc.

The study design was exploratory, qualitative and descriptive. Information were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data came from the open-ended interactive virtual interviews of women who conduct online businesses using the digital platform F-commerce. Available books, journals, documents, newspaper, data, report and magazine articles were reviewed as a secondary source of information. The study

selects 20 women Facebook page or group owners who operate their online business on Facebook staying at home. In-depth virtual interviews using a semi-structured protocol were conducted by researcher herself.

RESULTS

The study found that all woman entrepreneurs have started their online business using Facebook platform and they have no physical store. In the interview respondents said that F-commerce has brought blessings in their online business. All of them are the owner of Facebook based business pages. Some respondent shared the factors for starting their online business and therefore, the way they feel about their empowerment through F-commerce. They also disclosed the challenges have to face while conducting business on Facebook.

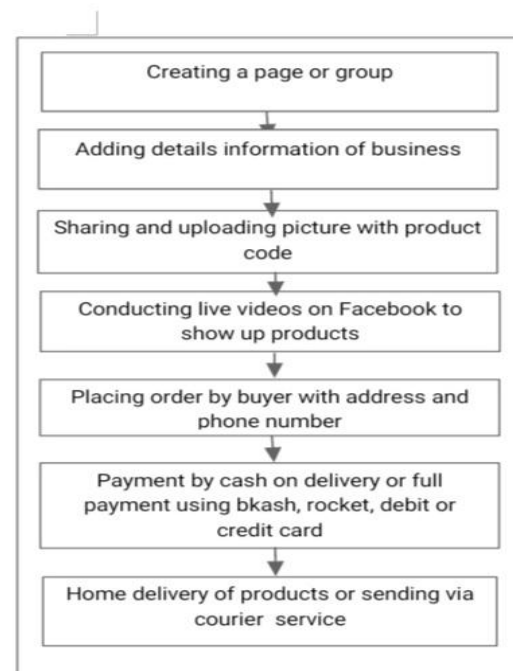


Figure 1: Common process of online business using Facebook.

Source- Compiled from Zabeen, Ara & Sarwar, (2013).

Women owners followed different sequential steps as common processes of online business using Facebook. First of all, it needed to create a page or group, owners then added details information of

their business. Then they started to conduct their business activities by sharing and uploading product pictures as well as videos. After choosing products, buyers placed their order and even pay through digital payment system such as Bkash or Rocket or Nagad, debit or credit card etc. And finally, buyers get their expected products through home delivery or courier service (Figure 1).

Benefits from F-commerce

There is no doubt that Facebook has changed our lives. It is an easy platform for commercial perspective. Maintaining balance between familial responsibilities at home and business activities, women can run their business using Facebook page or group (Table 1). Though empowerment is a multidisciplinary concept, F-commerce provides lots of benefits for women to be empowered. Hasan (2020) explained that F-commerce has been thriving in the last few years in Bangladesh and reached to the huge size of the Facebook audience that is nearly 40 million. Recent data compiled from various sources showed that- Facebook users is 40 million, F-commerce market size is Tk 300 to Tk 350 crore, store operation is over 3 lakh which is operated by women (60%).

Table 1: Benefits of F- commerce

Benefits	Descriptions
Business from home	Women can work staying at home without going to a shop using Facebook while maintaining balance between family and professional life.

Table 2: Activities of respondents to attract customer

Facebook live	Using Facebook live feature, seller or owner of a page can directly engage with potential customers via a combination of audio visual stimuli.
Share contest	Like,share are the common feature of Facebook. More like and share, the more popular a page is. Owners sometimes announce share contest to attract customers in their business page.
Offer package	Owner of a page, or group sometimes take the strategy to make his / her page more popular. In this regard various offer packages is announced. Such as- buy one, get one; delivery charge free offer etc.

Cost benefits	Facebook based business need not for storing ,inventory, employee, shop rent, utility bill etc.
Marketing benefits	Women can easily target their audience in the minimum cost.
Scope to show up abilities and skills	Facebook is a digital platform where women can show their hidden talents and skills in conducting their business. As a result, they become empowered and gain value and dignity from family and society.
Employment generation	Facebook is the easiest platform to start a business venture not only give a unique identity of a woman but enable them to empower other women also.

Participants expressed their views on benefits of F-commerce. All of them said that F-commerce enable women to work from home, investing low capital. However, the increase of such digital platform is creating a better scope for empowering women in our country.

Activities to attract customers

Women owners take various innovative actions to attract their customers. Some such activities are given in Table 2.

Respondents take the strategy to attract customers via Facebook live. They do not only share their product picture, they conduct live on Facebook to explain details product features with a combination of audio visual stimuli. Sometimes they announce share contest and offer package to attract customers.

Challenges faced by women

Table 3: Challenges faced by women involved in F-commerce

Study showed that respondents have faced the challenges regarding their reputation. Cyber crime, online harassment, blackmailing are some common barriers for them. Online payment system is also little bit risky.

Factors	Descriptions
Fake pages and reputational issues	Some fake business pages cheated with customers which hampers the trust and reputational issues of other online business owners.
Cyber Crime	Most of the Women owners don't have adequate knowledge about cyber crime and cyber laws. That's why they are facing challenges.
Online blackmail	Respondents are afraid of being their page or group hacked. Cyber criminals then start to blackmailing.
Bad comments while Facebook live	Fraud customers share their negative comments intentionally while live show of a business page conducting.
Coping of product designs	Preferred to copy others designs of product than innovative in some cases.
Inadequate network coverage	Study found that weak network coverage is common matter.
Lack of adequate knowledge	Some new owners don't have proper knowledge regarding F-commerce and various security issues.

Measures in curbing challenges

Respondents of this study were asked how can emerging challenges be faced. They gave their opinion that ultimately adequate knowledge regarding cyber crimes and cyber laws can minimize maximum challenges. From study results, it has found the following measures in curbing challenges-

- Adequate network coverage should be ensured to conduct online business.

- Willingness of women should be raised to be empowered using such easiest platform of business from home.
- It is essential to increase family supporting to start business on Facebook platform.
- Proper application of cyber law against cyber crimes occurring in online business platform and in f-commerce site.
- All entrepreneurs who are using Facebook page or group should aware about cyber crimes. Security issues should be concerned.
- Try to be innovative and to make unique style and design, should not copy others talents.
- In this regard our ethical sense should be raised.
- A comprehensive legal provision should have been acted for regulating F-commerce in doing online business.
- Rural women should be included in such potential digital platform of business which is enhancing empowerment.

Interview analysis

This study conducted open-ended interviews with 20 women entrepreneurs who run their online business using Facebook. During the interview, it has found that all respondent own a smart phone. When talking of their empowerment and the role of F-commerce most of the respondents thought that they are able to be empowered through F-commerce platform. All of them opined that Facebook helped them to become financially sufficient and increasing their decision-making power in family. It has explained by most of the respondents that when women become financially empowered, people start to give more important and value. It also increases their priority in family and society as well. All of them agreed with the fact that F-commerce is a booming sector for their empowerment in conducting business at home. This report is agreed with the report of Aditi (2019).

When asking about the benefits of F-commerce, all respondents agreed with that they have benefited from such digital platform. One respondent Shamim Ara gave her opinion that she maintained her office at staying home with her baby, and explained the economic benefits that her clothing business is more profitable and it is easy

to target and interact with people and get a higher return on investment. Nazmunahar Munni, an owner of Facebook page 'Shajghor' gave her opinion that F-commerce is the easiest platform to start a business venture not only provided a unique identity of a woman but also enable them to empower other women. She added that she is an owner of a jewelry business and has employed other women in her business. For example, two women work in packaging, a woman is involved in checking messages and replying, two are conducting Facebook live to show up products in details. Thus, F-commerce creates the opportunities of employment generation.

Participants of this study talked about different types of products that they sell. Study showed that most of them are involved in clothing business. Kaniz Akter, owner of Kaniz boutiques explained that multiple cloths items she was selling. Such as-sharees, kurtees, three piece, etc. Others were operating food, blogging, fashion apparel, home decors, and jewelry business.

Respondents also disclosed the challenges that had to face while conducting business on Facebook. Some respondents were afraid of being their page hacked as it will hamper their reputation. Online payment is little bit risky as cyber crime is increasing day by day. Sometimes coping of product designs, online blackmailing by some culprits creates problems. Farhana, an owner of an online clothing business said about the technical problems of Facebook. She added the network coverage problem is one of the key challenges in conducting online business. She expressed some fraud customers comments negatively while conducting to live on her Facebook page or group. It is a common bitter experience for most of the owners.

Most of the participants said that during COVID-19, people are mostly dependent on online shopping. Online shopping has increased dramatically due to extend lockdown and for maintaining social distance. As a result many women have got the opportunity to become empowered by doing online business at home.

Respondents who were students entrepreneurs are engaged in online business using Facebook during

COVID-19. However, all the respondents shared their view that F-commerce has changed their lives undeniably. It is an easier medium for commercial potential. It also increases their value and dignity in both family and society. This study is in accordance with the study of Etee (2020).

DISCUSSION

Nowadays F-commerce plays a stronger role to empower women in the easiest way of doing business using Facebook (Chowdhury, 2020). The ultimate purpose of this study was to analyze the use of F-commerce, an integrated digital platform for online business activities to assess the economic empowerment of women in Bangladesh. It has draw attention on how F-commerce contributed to women empowerment. From interview with women owners operating online business using Facebook, a details picture of their Facebook based online business and how it is helpful for their empowerment were analysed. The study showed that most of the women are housewives and students. They have family support to start a business using Facebook. All the respondents agreed with that F-commerce as an effective tool for their empowerment. Similar report has been published by journalist Chowdhury (2020) and Hossain (2018). Within little capital investment women can start online business page using F-commerce platform from their home. It costs no money, anyone can create a page or group to conduct online business through his page or group. Although it is too early to ascertain what the future holds for F-Commerce, but it has evidently become a great opportunity for small and medium businesses to approach a worldwide audience via Facebook with a least cost (Mozaik, 2012).

Facebook is considered as a women friendly business platform where women can easily be run their business in Bangladesh (Tabassum, 2018; Etee 2020). To start a business in a general store or showroom, it needs large amount of money, manpower, trade license issues and other formalities. But on Facebook based business platform any woman can start a new business without any complexities of physical store or showroom business (Sania, 2020). In our society, it is difficult to take initiatives for empowerment

of women in such digital platform (Singh and Belwal, 2008). The critical analysis of F-commerce for women equality and empowerment support the present study to indentify the challenges and barriers (Kabeer, 2005).

The study reported various challenges faced by woman entrepreneurs. Weak network coverage hinders the online business activities, cyber crimes such as Facebook ID hacking, online blackmail, bad comments on live show, etc are very common. Sometimes opening fake page, some culprits conduct fake business transactions and cheated with customers which hamper the reputation of real business owner. This study is in agreement with the study of Haque (2013). Though various challenges were found from interview analysis with women entrepreneurs, all the respondents agreed that F-commerce brought blessings for them. They gain more value from people as an empowered person in the society as well as family. The study showed that F-commerce is helping women to be self-reliant and to create their own identity. The Covid-19 pandemic has created more scope for women which is supported by the report of Hasan (2020). The author of this study hopes that this study will enrich the idea to increase the scope of women to be empowered through F-commerce.

CONCLUSION

Facebook is a very popular social media platform across the world and its business platform is now serving as a blessing of new hope for our women to be empowered using such platform. Though women face multiple challenges in using F-commerce, it gives lots of opportunities to be empowered staying at home with investing little capital. Women should be given the opportunity to access information technology in every sphere. All sorts of technical and others problem regarding f-commerce should be solved. In this case, our good will and efforts are needed. The willingness can play an important role. In a nutshell, the empowerment of women can be facilitated by using F-commerce in the efforts of all of us and the government.

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