

# The hidden costs behind e-commerce convenience

By [Nancy Dusani](#) 24 Mar 2026

We frequently discuss e-commerce as merely a convenience, a quicker and more effective way to obtain the goods we require in a world where time is of the essence.



Nancy Dusani. Image supplied

However, this framing feels inadequate because it ignores the deeper and more profound change that is occurring in how consumers think, make decisions, and ultimately interact with brands in a digital-first setting.

What we are witnessing is not just a change in channel from physical stores to online platforms, but a transformation in behaviour that is being shaped by technology, data, and systems designed to influence choices in ways that are often subtle and largely invisible to the average consumer.

As a result, businesses are no longer just competing on product, price, or service but on their ability to navigate and leverage these digital ecosystems effectively while still maintaining trust and relevance in the eyes of increasingly aware audiences.

This shift demands a more critical lens, particularly from those operating within the business and marketing landscape, because the long-term implications extend far beyond short-term sales and into the broader dynamics of consumer culture.

## The illusion of smarter spending

There is a widely accepted belief that e-commerce has empowered consumers to make smarter financial decisions, largely due to the ease of comparing prices, accessing promotions, and taking advantage of constant discounts that are prominently displayed across platforms, yet this narrative does not fully account for the behavioural mechanisms at play behind the scenes.

In reality, many of these platforms are designed not only to respond to consumer demand but to actively shape it through personalised recommendations, retargeting strategies, and pricing models that adapt in real time based on browsing behaviour, purchase history, and perceived willingness to spend.

This creates a situation where consumers feel in control of their decisions while simultaneously being guided toward additional purchases, often resulting in higher overall spending despite the perception of saving.

money.

For businesses, this raises an important strategic consideration around whether success is driven by delivering genuine value to consumers or by securing visibility within algorithm-driven environments that ultimately determine what gets seen and what gets ignored.

## **Speed as expectation, not advantage**

One of the most profound shifts brought about by e-commerce is the redefinition of speed from a competitive advantage into a basic expectation, as consumers have become accustomed to next-day and even same-day delivery options that were once considered premium services but are now seen as standard.

This has placed immense pressure on businesses to invest in logistics, fulfilment infrastructure, and last-mile delivery capabilities, transforming what was traditionally viewed as an operational function into a central component of the overall customer experience.

At the same time, the pursuit of speed has introduced a range of hidden costs, particularly in terms of environmental impact, as increased delivery volumes contribute to higher emissions, excessive packaging and a growing culture of returns that further compounds the issue.

While consumers continue to prioritise convenience, these externalities remain largely out of sight, creating a disconnect between the benefits experienced at the individual level and the broader consequences faced at a systemic level.

## **Choice, curation, and control**

E-commerce is often positioned as a gateway to limitless choice, enabling consumers to access products and brands from across the globe with unprecedented ease, yet the reality is that this abundance is increasingly filtered through algorithmic systems that curate what is presented to users based on a range of data-driven factors.

This means that while the market may be vast, the portion of it that is visible to any given consumer is carefully shaped, raising important questions about the nature of choice and the extent to which it is genuinely autonomous.

For businesses, particularly smaller brands and new entrants, this creates a highly competitive environment where success is not solely determined by the quality of the offering but by the ability to achieve visibility within these controlled digital spaces.

As a result, e-commerce cannot be viewed as a completely level playing field, as those with greater resources and a deeper understanding of platform dynamics are often better positioned to capture attention and drive conversion.

## **Global access, local pressure**

In markets such as South Africa, the expansion of e-commerce presents both significant opportunities and notable challenges, as it lowers barriers to entry for entrepreneurs while simultaneously exposing local businesses to intensified competition from international players who are able to offer products at lower prices due to scale and supply chain efficiencies.

This dual dynamic creates a complex environment in which local brands must not only establish their presence online but also differentiate themselves in ways that resonate with consumers beyond price alone, whether through storytelling, quality, or a strong sense of local relevance.

At the same time, the influx of global products can place strain on domestic industries, raising important considerations around economic sustainability and the long-term viability of local production. For business leaders, this underscores the need to think strategically about positioning, value creation, and the role they play within a broader and increasingly interconnected marketplace.

## **From transactions to behaviour**

What makes e-commerce particularly compelling from a business perspective is its ability to influence behaviour at scale, as it reduces friction in the purchasing process to such an extent that buying becomes less of a deliberate decision and more of an almost automatic response to prompts, recommendations, and convenience-driven triggers.

This shift has significant implications for how brands engage with consumers, as it opens up opportunities for growth while also introducing questions around responsibility, particularly in relation to overconsumption and the long-term impact of encouraging constant purchasing.

Businesses are therefore faced with the challenge of balancing commercial objectives with a more thoughtful approach to customer relationships, one that considers not only immediate conversion but also trust, loyalty, and sustainability over time.

In this context, the role of e-commerce extends beyond facilitating transactions and becomes a key driver of how consumption patterns evolve in the digital age.

## **Rethinking the role of convenience**

E-commerce will undoubtedly continue to play a central role in the future of retail and business more broadly, but its next phase of growth is likely to be defined not just by expansion and innovation, but by increased scrutiny from consumers, regulators, and industry stakeholders who are beginning to question its broader impact.

While convenience remains a powerful value proposition, it should not be the sole metric by which success is measured, particularly as awareness grows around issues such as data privacy, environmental sustainability, and the influence of digital platforms on consumer behaviour.

For businesses, this presents an opportunity to take a more considered approach, one that recognises the complexities of the e-commerce ecosystem and seeks to create value in a way that is both commercially viable and socially responsible.

Ultimately, the conversation needs to shift from what e-commerce enables in the moment to what it shapes over time, because its true impact lies not just in how we shop, but in how it continues to redefine expectations, markets, and behaviours on a global scale.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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