

Journal Of Resource Management, Economics And Business

e-ISSN 2963-0266

<https://portal.xjurnal.com/index.php/REMICS/index>

Volume: 5 Issue: 3 Year: 2026

<https://doi.org/10.58468/remics.v5i3.280>



THE EXPANSION ENGINE IN A NEW ENTRANT MARKETPLACE: COMMUNITY FEATURES AND A POTENTIAL BOUNDARY CONDITION IN THE TOCO CASE

Erwin Sugiarto^{1*}, Jurry Hatammimi²

Telkom University^{1,2},

erwinsugiarto@student.telkomuniversity.ac.id^{1*}, jurryhatammimi@telkomuniversity.ac.id²

Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how Toco's Community Space shapes growth mechanisms in a new entrant marketplace. The study investigates how the Expansion Engine operates when users already participate in established external community ecosystems, a contextual condition not explicitly differentiated in the original framework.

Research Methodology: An exploratory qualitative case study combined semi-structured interviews with eight participants, community observation, and digital document analysis. Data were analysed through open, axial, and selective coding, while trustworthiness was supported through multi-source triangulation.

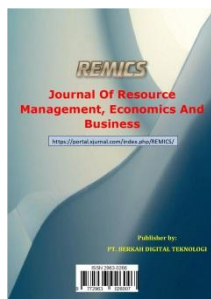
Results: Toco was only partially effective as a digital enabler; users enacted non-monetary value exchange only to a limited extent; and value integration remained incomplete. Uneven application stability constrained the digital enabler; richer information, trust, and social support remained concentrated in external community ecosystems; and community contributions were not consistently connected to visible reputation or traceable transactions. These constraints were particularly evident among sellers embedded in established external community ecosystems.

Limitations: This study is limited by its single-case, cross-sectional design and small purposive sample of eight participants. Seller participants were drawn from the trading card game (TCG) segment, where established external communities may shape users' needs and behaviour differently from other product categories. The findings therefore provide contextual insights into Toco's early growth phase and should not be generalised to all marketplace platforms or user segments without further research.

Contribution: This study contributes to digital platform and marketplace research, social commerce, platform ecosystem management, and information systems by examining how the Expansion Engine operates in a new entrant marketplace with an integrated community feature. It offers an empirical account of how application stability, value exchange, and value integration shape community activation, and identifies the maturity of users' external community ecosystems as a potential contextual condition. The findings may inform researchers studying platform growth and managers designing community features, seller engagement, and discovery-to-transaction mechanisms in early-stage marketplaces.

Keywords: *Community Space, Digital marketplace, Ecosystem maturity, Expansion Engine, New entrant marketplace*





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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of digital marketplaces in Southeast Asia has intensified competition between large incumbent platforms and new entrant platforms struggling to build their user bases. In Indonesia, the internet economy reached USD 90 billion in 2024, with e-commerce accounting for approximately 72% of that value, and is projected to reach USD 150 billion by 2030 (Statista, 2025). Within this landscape, Shopee and Tokopedia jointly account for 64% of marketplace traffic, leaving little room for smaller players to compete through transactional differentiation alone.

Toco, a local marketplace launched in August 2024 by Arnold Sebastian Egg, the entrepreneur behind OVO and Tokobagus (now OLX), differentiates through two structural strategies. First, a zero admin fee policy: sellers keep 100% of their listed price, with only a flat Rp 2,000 fee charged to buyers per transaction, formalised through a written certificate as a permanent commitment. By August 2025, this policy had attracted 150,000 active sellers (SWA Media, 2025). Second, Toco integrates a community feature, officially called the Community Space. The feature allows users to form groups based on shared hobbies or interests, post content, discuss products, and complete purchases either through the standard marketplace or directly from a community post within the same application. This dual purchase pathway distinguishes Toco from other Indonesian platforms where social interaction and transactions remain separate.

Despite attracting 150,000 active sellers by August 2025 (SWA Media, 2025), the Community Space has shown very limited engagement. Its largest community held only 3,370 members against a seller base of 150,000, the vast majority of communities showed no posting activity for more than a month, and 82% of negative user reviews in 2025 cited application instability as the primary concern. This gap between strategic intent and operational reality raises a substantive question: when a marketplace platform integrates an internal community feature as its core differentiation, what mechanisms determine whether the Community Space supports growth, and what conditions constrain its activation?

Existing literature on social commerce and platform strategy has extensively studied community engagement on mature platforms. Algharabat and Rana (2021) examined social commerce community engagement including platforms such as Facebook Marketplace, Lin and Shen (2023) studied Xiaohongshu as a community e-commerce case, and Gong et al. (2024) analysed the factors driving social shopping behaviour on social commerce platforms. Resource-Based View scholarship has positioned community as a potentially VRIN strategic resource when it generates relational value through repeated interaction, as demonstrated empirically by Gibson et al. (2021) and theorised originally by Barney (1991). However, empirical studies examining how community mechanisms operate or fail in new entrant marketplace with limited network effects remain scarce. Notably, Fahreza et al. (2024) demonstrate that digital startups in early growth stages require iterative, user-learning-based strategies rather than the scale and efficiency approaches typical of established platforms, suggesting that the mechanisms enabling growth in new entrant contexts are structurally distinct from those on incumbent platforms. This study addresses that gap by analysing Toco's Community Space through the Expansion Engine framework (Almunawar & Anshari, 2022), which explains digital marketplace

growth through three analytically connected components: digital enabler, value exchange, and value integration, leading to network effects. The framework is particularly suited to new entrant platforms because it focuses on internal mechanisms that must be in place before network effects can emerge.

This study aims to analyse how the Expansion Engine mechanisms operate in practice within Toco's Community Space, and to identify the conditions that enable or prevent each stage from functioning. Three research questions guide the analysis: (1) How effectively does Toco's Community Space function as a digital enabler? (2) How do users enact non-monetary value exchange within the Community Space? (3) How is value integration understood and practised in an new entrant marketplace, and what limitations emerge?

The contribution of this study is twofold. Empirically, it provides a detailed account of how a community-integrated marketplace operates during its formative phase, including the conditions that constrain activation of the Expansion Engine. Theoretically, it extends the empirical application of the framework by examining a context not explicitly differentiated in the original formulation: users who already participate in established external community ecosystems. The findings suggest that ecosystem maturity may condition how readily digital enabler, value exchange, and value integration mechanisms become activated. Rather than challenging the framework's underlying logic, the study identifies a contextual consideration that may improve its application to new entrant marketplaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Resource-Based View and Community as Strategic Resource

The Resource-Based View (RBV) holds that sustained competitive advantage derives from internal resources that are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). Gibson et al. (2021) demonstrate empirically that community constitutes such a resource in digital platforms, because its value is embedded in social relations, shared norms, and trust built through repeated interaction, characteristics competitors cannot replicate. Barney et al. (2021) further show that value creation through co-specialisation only materialises when contributing actors expect a share of the jointly created outcome. For new entrant marketplace competing against financially superior incumbents, community therefore represents a potentially decisive strategic resource, but only when platform mechanisms enable users to actually generate and exchange value within it. In smaller-scale business contexts, competitive advantage is more effectively built through innovation-based differentiation and user relationship strategies rather than price or scale competition (Hatammimi & Thahara, 2022), reinforcing the strategic logic of community as a differentiator for new entrant platforms such as Toco.

Social Commerce and Platform Strategy

Algharabat and Rana (2021) define social commerce as e-commerce that integrates social features to support user interaction in the shopping process, and found that social support and community member trust positively influence community engagement in emerging markets. Two models exist: e-commerce-centric platforms that add social layers, such as Shopee and Toco, and social-centric platforms that add transactional layers, such as Facebook Marketplace, Xiaohongshu, and TikTok Shop. Lin and Shen (2023) showed that community factors on Xiaohongshu significantly increased purchase intention, demonstrating the growth potential of the social-centric model. Toco belongs to the e-commerce-centric category, where the Community Space serves as a differentiating enabler rather than the platform's origin.

From a platform strategy perspective, Toco is classified as a nascent digital platform in the formation stage (Nerbel & Kreutzer, 2023), facing the classic chicken-and-egg problem where sellers wait for buyers and buyers wait for sellers (Bartels & Schmitt, 2022). Against incumbents that have achieved winner-take-all dynamics through strong network effects and consumer lock-in (Parker et al., 2016), Toco's strategic response is a micromarket approach targeting niche interest-based segments, with the Community Space as its operational instrument.

The Expansion Engine Framework

Almunawar and Anshari (2022) introduce the Expansion Engine to explain how digital marketplaces grow through the interplay of digital enabler and value integration, described as two concepts operating in tandem, with value exchange as the unit transferred between them and network effects as the conditional downstream outcome. A digital enabler connects customers by providing technical infrastructure, interaction rules, and coordination mechanisms that allow economic actors to exchange value more efficiently than conventional market mechanisms. In this study, digital enabler is operationalised as application stability and the Community Space as a shared-interest interaction venue.

Value exchange encompasses both monetary and non-monetary value. Almunawar and Anshari (2022) identify two non-monetary forms: information and knowledge (ik), such as reviews and product discussions that reduce uncertainty, and intangible benefits (b), including trust and social support, which emerge causally from sustained information exchange. The relationship is sequential: information exchange must occur before intangible benefits can develop. Value integration occurs when these actor-generated values connect and accumulate into an integrated platform experience, linking community contributions to transactions and loyalty. Without value integration, value exchange produces no strategic growth impact, and network effects cannot emerge. From a broader ecosystem perspective, platform value is not generated solely by the platform owner but emerges through co-creation processes involving diverse ecosystem actors, including users and communities (Novani et al., 2023). This perspective underscores why value integration in Toco depends not only on technical feature availability but on the active participation of multiple actor groups in generating and exchanging value. It should be noted that Almunawar and Anshari (2022) present these components through conceptual narrative rather than a structured model; the sequential operationalisation applied in this study represents the authors' analytical interpretation of that framework for empirical application.

Virtual Community Features and User Experience

Tsugawa and Niida (2021) found empirically that community sustainability depends not on member count but on early interaction patterns and the presence of active core users, communities without bidirectional exchange stagnate regardless of nominal size. Liu et al. (2023) show that community-based governance mechanisms, including feedback systems and dispute resolution, contribute to trust formation between users and the platform. When these social mechanisms are absent, community features cannot fulfil their strategic function.

User experience functions as an enabling or constraining condition for all community interaction. Lucas et al. (2023) model UX as the cognitive evaluation between perceived benefits and perceived sacrifices, including technical disruptions and system errors. Hajarian et al. (2023) demonstrate that applications rated as successful consistently display utility and interactivity, while those rated poorly suffer technical failures that prevent users from completing core tasks. When these foundational UX conditions are unmet, community features cannot generate meaningful engagement regardless of their design quality.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative exploratory approach with a single case study strategy, consistent with the interpretivist paradigm that views social reality as constructed through the meanings of actors involved (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The unit of analysis is the internal community mechanism of Toco's marketplace platform, specifically its Community Space feature. A quantitative approach was not feasible because the population of active buyers who had transacted organically on Toco could not be operationally defined, as the platform does not provide open access to buyer data, making the sampling frame required for survey-based research unavailable (Saunders et al., 2023).

Data were collected across three settings: the Toco mobile application (community observation), a physical TCG store in West Jakarta (field observation on 31 May 2026 during a weekly tournament event), and online platforms including Zoom, WhatsApp, and written asynchronous channels (interviews and document collection). Three data collection methods were used: semi-structured in-depth interviews, community observation, and digital document analysis.

Interviews were conducted with eight participants selected through purposive sampling across five categories: two experimental buyer participants, two sellers not joined to the community (N3, N4), two sellers joined to the community (N5, N6), one platform operational representative (N8), and one platform management representative (N7), between March and June 2026. Seller participants were drawn from the trading card game (TCG) category, selected because its established external community ecosystems provided the empirical conditions most relevant to examining the Expansion Engine under conditions where established external ecosystems were already present. Table 1 presents the seller profiles.

Table 1: Seller Participant Profiles

Code	Store	Products	Reviews	Active Since	Other Platforms	Physical Store
N3	AZR	581	53	Oct 2025	WhatsApp, Facebook	Yes
N4	CCC	3,874	1,300	May 2025	Tokopedia, WhatsApp, Facebook	Yes
N5	WDZ	12	4	Mar 2026	TikTok Live	No
N6	ANT	11	0	Apr 2026	Tokopedia, TikTok	No

Source: Store profile data from toco.id, accessed June 2026

Community observation was conducted from January to May 2026 across eight TCG-related communities on the Toco application, recording posting patterns, interaction rates, and content nature. Document analysis covered Google Play Store reviews, Toco's official social media and YouTube channels, application version update history, and the platform's public product feedback portal.

The three Expansion Engine components were operationalised as follows. Digital enabler was observed through application stability (bug reports, search behaviour, checkout friction) and the Community Space as a shared-interest interaction venue. Value exchange was observed through information and knowledge exchange (types and quality of community posts) and intangible benefits (trust signals and social support between users). Value integration was observed through the connection between community contributions and seller reputation, and between community discussion and purchase transactions.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2020), proceeding through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding using QualCoder software. Trustworthiness was maintained through multi-source triangulation across interview, observation, and document data, selective member checking with key informants from each participant group, and a comprehensive audit trail documenting all analytical decisions. The research design is cross-sectional, capturing conditions during the platform's early growth phase.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. RESULTS

Findings are organised around the three Expansion Engine components. Selective coding produced three central themes: a gap between feature availability and participation effectiveness for digital enabler; dependency on external community ecosystems for value exchange; and limited conversion of social interaction into economic action for value integration.

Digital Enabler: Application Stability

Application stability was uneven across user groups. On search functionality, buyer participant N2 reported receiving entirely irrelevant results before finishing their search query, with products from unrelated categories appearing instead of the item searched. Seller N4 similarly reported that the search engine activated before the user finished typing, returning incomplete and inaccurate results for buyers. In contrast, seller N6 reported accurate and fast search results, attributing this to the platform's still-limited product database producing no loading delay. This same contrast appeared in other functions: N1 encountered a checkout bug allowing transactions to proceed even when a store was set to offline status, and N3 reported excessive repeat order notifications arriving every ten minutes. N4 reported the most significant impact, stating that application problems had caused approximately 20% of buyers to abandon the platform and request in-person purchases at the physical store instead, with most not returning. The platform confirmed all these inputs were logged in the development backlog.

Digital Enabler: The Community Space as a Shared-Interest Interaction Venue

The Community Space was recognised by buyer participants as Toco's most distinctive feature, one not found on other Indonesian marketplaces. However, platform-wide observation data collected in October and December 2025 showed that community activity was consistently low across all segments. Of the 100 largest communities by membership, only 16% had posted within the previous seven days, while 70% had their last post more than a month prior. Across a sample of 100 recent posts in five communities, only 16 to 34 posts received any interaction at all, almost entirely in the form of likes, with comments numbering between zero and two per 100 posts. Growth data collected over 42 days between October and December 2025 showed that while the six largest communities added members, posting activity grew only minimally: the largest community, Toco Seller Community, added 140 members but only 180 posts over 42 days.

Observation of eight TCG-related communities from January to May 2026 confirmed this pattern at the segment level. All eight communities grew in membership over four months, but posting activity remained nearly static. 'Pokemon Scale World Indonesia' added members but recorded zero new posts across the entire four-month period. The fastest-growing community by percentage, 'Komunitas TCG & Mezastar Pokemon Indonesia', reached 79 members by May 2026 but held only 21 posts in total, indicating that most members joined without ever posting. Across all eight communities combined, 523 posts from 1,542 members generated only 160

likes and 11 replies. Four communities recorded zero likes and zero replies throughout the observation period. The only genuine bidirectional conversation found across all eight communities occurred in 'Komunitas TCG & Mezastar Pokemon Indonesia', where a buyer post requesting bulk TCG cards at reseller pricing received a reply from a seller two days later directing the conversation to direct message. Whether this led to a transaction could not be confirmed as the continuation moved to private channels. All other posts across all eight communities consisted exclusively of promotional product listings, with no discussion, review, or question-and-answer content found.

Sellers who had not joined the Community Space (N3 and N4) positioned Toco primarily as a transactional channel and perceived limited additional utility because their existing WhatsApp groups, Facebook communities, physical stores, and offline events already formed established external community ecosystems. Sellers who had joined the Community Space (N5, N6) reported two compounding barriers: unwillingness to post because the community was empty, and reluctance to initiate conversation because no one else had done so first.

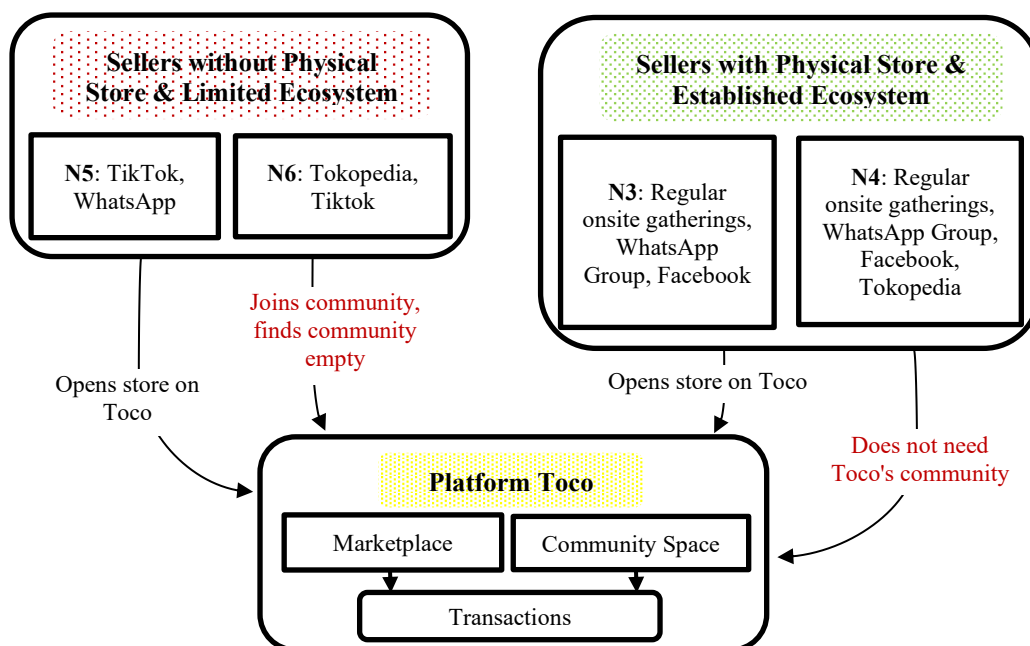


Figure 1: Seller Engagement Patterns in Toco's Community Feature

Source: Processed from research data, June 2026

Application update history from January to May 2026 recorded more than fifteen version updates with zero changes to the Community Space feature, and the platform's public feedback portal listed community development status as 'Not Currently Being Processed'.

Value Exchange: Information and Knowledge

Information and knowledge exchange occurred only at the most basic level: community posts consisted of product listings, with observation showing some posts lacked price information entirely, requiring buyers to click through to the store page. No reviews, pre-purchase comparisons, or product condition assessments were found across any of the eight observed communities. Buyers N1 and N2 described richer content, product benefits, long-term usage experience, and peer testimonials, as what they would find valuable, but found none of it

in Toco. Both still relied on YouTube and external articles for product information. Meanwhile sellers N3 and N4 obtained all market intelligence externally: N3 through Facebook communities organised by game title, N4 through WhatsApp as the primary channel for pre-orders, pricing, and game rule discussions. Toco's Community Space played no role in either seller's information ecosystem.

Value Exchange: Trust

Trust formation through community activity did not occur organically. Buyer N1 understood conceptually that seller activity in the community, such as receiving likes and comments, should signal trustworthiness, but found no evidence of this in practice. Buyer N2 proposed that trust in a community requires a recognisable figure, such as a known content creator, to serve as a credible anchor, but no such mechanism existed in Toco. Sellers N3 and N4 built trust entirely outside Toco: N3 through product delivery quality and after-sales service that generated word-of-mouth referrals, N4 through an offline brand established since 2015 with multiple locations. Seller N5 acknowledged that community should matter for trust but reported no buyer had ever cited it. Seller N6 used authentic product photography as a trust signal but received only likes with no comments in response.

Value Exchange: Social Support

Social support within the Community Space was similarly absent. N1 found interactions limited to likes with no follow-up responses. N5 received some likes but remained largely inactive because the community was too sparse. N6 reported never interacting with other users' posts and described the experience as speaking to themselves with no one responding. In contrast, N3 maintained an active WhatsApp community spanning members from multiple cities, and regularly hosted in-person gatherings with prizes as a community bonding mechanism. N4 described an ecosystem where the boundary between seller and buyer dissolved entirely, with all members helping each other answer questions about TCG products and rules, with community identity reinforced through matching team uniforms.

Value Integration: Information to Reputation

No mechanism existed within Toco to convert community contributions into visible reputation signals. Community activity was not reflected in seller profiles, and no contributor badges or ranking systems were available. Platform management confirmed that reputation-based community integration was part of a medium-term roadmap rather than a current priority. The most significant finding in this dimension came from observation: the researcher discovered one seller's store (N6) through a community post and completed a transaction, yet the seller was entirely unaware that their store had been found through the community channel until informed during the interview, indicating that no notification mechanism existed for community-sourced traffic or transactions.

Value Integration: Discussion to Transaction

The technical pathway from community to transaction existed via a 'Buy Now' button on community posts, but the organic connection between community discussion and purchase decision did not form. Buyer participants reported purchasing decisions driven by price comparison, not community discussion. Pre-purchase dialogue occurred through store chat, not community posts. Among all seller participants, not one could cite a transaction originating from community interaction, the single exception being the researcher's own purchase during the field study. Sellers N4 had independently developed manual workarounds, directing offline

customers to their Toco listings, and in one case splitting product stock across platforms to give buyers a reason to visit both.

B. DISCUSSION

Table 2 summarises the condition of each Expansion Engine stage across both the transactional marketplace and the Community Space.

Table 2: Expansion Engine Condition on Toco's Community Space

Stage	Toco as Marketplace	Toco Community Space
Digital Enabler	Partially successful: sellers joined due to zero admin fees; buyer traffic still limited; app instability complaints reported.	Partially effective: the feature provided an interaction venue, but low activity, uneven application stability, and limited perceived additional value constrained sustained interaction.
Value Exchange	Occurs through purchase transactions, store chat, and post-purchase reviews.	Limited and fragmented: basic product information was exchanged, but richer knowledge, trust, and social support remained concentrated in external communities.
Value Integration	Incomplete: the technical pathway to transactions existed, but community contributions were not connected consistently to visible reputation or traceable transactions.	

Source: Processed from research data (2026), adapted from Almunawar & Anshari (2022)

The Expansion Engine has operated on the transactional layer of Toco's marketplace but has not activated on the community layer. Using the framework's own output indicators, reduction of transaction costs, occurrence of mutually beneficial value exchange, and value accumulation that strengthens the ecosystem for all actors (Almunawar & Anshari, 2022), only the first has been partially met through the zero admin fee policy. The second and third remain unachieved within the Community Space, pointing to three categories of barrier that operate simultaneously and reinforce each other.

Layered and Mutually Reinforcing Barriers

The limited activation of the Expansion Engine within the Community Space is not attributable to a single cause. Three categories of barrier operate simultaneously and reinforce each other. First, technical barriers, including application instability, irrelevant search results, and absent notification mechanisms, prevent foundational user experience conditions from being met. Lucas et al. (2023) show that when perceived sacrifices exceed perceived benefits, even high-value features may not produce positive user experiences. Second, community dynamic barriers create two self-reinforcing traps: users do not post because the community is empty, and the community remains empty because users do not post; simultaneously, users who have joined are reluctant to initiate because no one else has done so first. Third, and most structurally significant, ecosystem barriers arise because external community ecosystems serving TCG hobbyists, including WhatsApp groups, Facebook communities organised by game title, and weekly in-person tournaments, already fulfil many functions that the Community Space seeks to provide, with greater depth and established membership. Tsugawa and Niida (2021) confirm that community sustainability depends on early interaction patterns and active core users, conditions not yet consistently present in Toco's Community Space but established in these external community ecosystems.

Two Seller Profiles and Differentiated Dynamics

The seller population is not homogeneous with respect to community incentives. Sellers N3 and N4, with large catalogues, physical stores, and established external community ecosystem, joined Toco as a transactional channel and found no marginal value in the Community Space: their buyers already know them, their reputation is already built, and their community already exists. Sellers N5 and N6, operating primarily online without established external community ecosystems, could theoretically benefit most from the Community Space as a discovery mechanism, but found themselves trapped by the absence of existing activity. Figure 2 visualises the gap between current conditions and the value integration state that the Expansion Engine would require.

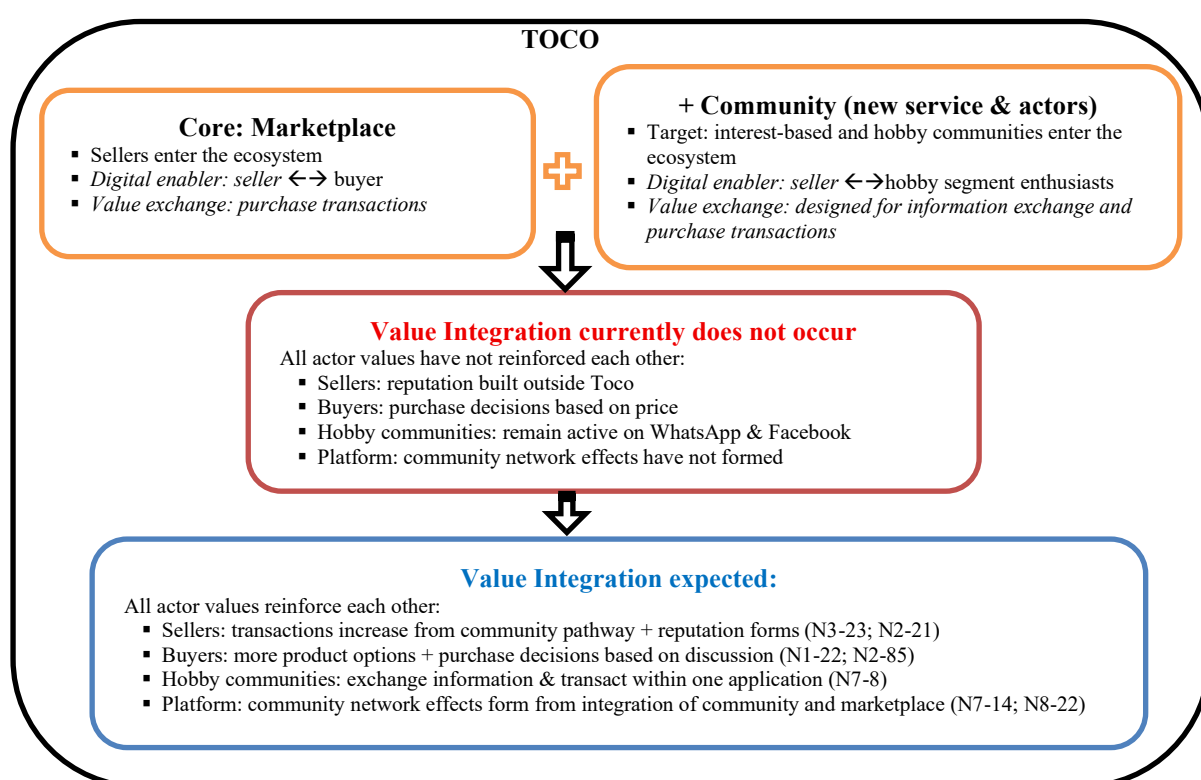


Figure 2: Expansion Engine Mechanism on Toco: Actual vs Expected Condition

Source: Processed from research data (June 2026)

A Potential Boundary Condition in Applying the Expansion Engine

In this study, a boundary condition refers to a contextual circumstance that may influence when or how readily the mechanisms proposed by a framework operate, rather than invalidate the framework itself. The Expansion Engine was illustrated through the case of GoJek, where a digital platform coordinated actors and exchanges that had previously been fragmented. The original framework does not explicitly differentiate how pre-existing external community ecosystems may influence the activation of its mechanisms. The Toco case therefore provides a contrasting context in which sellers already participate in WhatsApp groups, Facebook communities, physical stores, and recurring offline events that support information exchange, trust, social support, and reputation.

Under these conditions, feature availability alone may be insufficient to activate the mechanisms organically. Sellers embedded in established external community ecosystems perceived limited additional or measurable benefits from reproducing similar activities within a

new platform. This does not contradict the Expansion Engine's central logic; rather, it suggests that the initial ecosystem position of participating actors may influence how readily digital enabler, value exchange, and value integration become connected. The findings also indicate that non-financial incentives, particularly social recognition and visibility, may remain relevant. A contributor leaderboard could provide a marketplace-integrated reputation signal visible to potential buyers, although its effectiveness should be tested as a limited activation experiment rather than assumed.

The TCG findings also indicate a segment-specific contextual requirement. In product categories where value depends on authenticity, condition, and collectibility, community discussion can provide educational and validation functions for buyers. When such content is absent, buyers may rely primarily on price. Educational content should therefore be treated as a contextual requirement for value integration in collectible-product segments, rather than as a separate universal boundary condition of the Expansion Engine.

Platform Responsibilities in Activating the Engine

Table 3 maps the capacity of each actor to change the conditions blocking the Expansion Engine. The key finding is that individual buyers and sellers cannot resolve the structural barriers alone. Platform-initiated intervention is the only lever available for most barriers.

Table 3: Actor Capacity to Change Expansion Engine Conditions

Barrier	Buyers	Sellers N3/N4	Sellers N5/N6	Platform: Capable?	Platform: Cost?
Community empty; no one initiates	Cannot	No incentive	Cannot alone	Yes, initiate content and contributor leaderboard as early trigger	Low
Technical feature issues	Cannot	Cannot	Cannot	Yes, fix incrementally (in backlog)	Medium
No reputation accumulation mechanism	Cannot	Cannot	Cannot	Yes, build contributor badge on user profile	Medium, one-time
Community-to-transaction path not notified	Cannot	Model exists; not yet in Toco	Cannot	Yes, add seller notification when community discussion is relevant	Medium, one-time
Mature external ecosystem already exists	Not relevant	Large ecosystem; no financial incentive to migrate	Small ecosystem; can potentially be brought to Toco	Yes, contributor leaderboard per community to encourage migration from external ecosystems	Low to Medium

Source: Processed from research data (June 2026)

A contributor leaderboard emerged as one potential low-cost activation mechanism across several barriers. It could provide visible recognition for early contributors, but its effectiveness would require pilot testing. Its dual function addresses both the dynamic barrier, triggering initial activity in empty communities, and the ecosystem barrier for the N5/N6 profile, offering social recognition unavailable on WhatsApp or Facebook. For the N3/N4 profile, the more relevant intervention is a notification mechanism converting the technically functional discovery pathway into a visible, attributable benefit for sellers.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how the Expansion Engine operates when a new entrant marketplace integrates a Community Space as a primary differentiation mechanism, and which conditions constrain its activation. Three conclusions correspond to the three research questions.

First, Toco's infrastructure was only partially effective as a digital enabler. Transaction costs were reduced through the zero admin fee policy, and core features are available, but application instability is uneven across user segments and the Community Space has not functioned as a consistent interaction venue. The enabler has not yet produced effective interaction among actors.

Second, users enacted non-monetary value exchange within the Community Space only to a limited extent. Users understood the types of value that could be exchanged, but participants already inside the Community Space tended to wait for others to initiate interaction, while sellers outside it perceived that their established external community ecosystems already met their information, trust, and social-support needs. Information and knowledge exchange remains at the level of basic product promotion; trust and social support have not formed organically within the platform.

Third, value integration remained incomplete. The technical pathway from community to transaction exists, but the connection is not closed: sellers receive no notification when buyers discover their stores through community posts, community activity does not accumulate into visible reputation, and the platform has classified community integration as a medium-term roadmap item rather than a current priority. In the TCG segment specifically, value integration also requires educational content about product value, a precondition not addressed in the original framework.

Taken together, these findings confirm the Expansion Engine's relevance as an analytical lens for new entrant marketplace while indicating a potential boundary condition in its application: the maturity of users' external community ecosystems. When sellers already obtain information exchange, trust, social support, and reputation through established external community ecosystems, feature availability alone may not be sufficient to activate equivalent platform-based mechanisms.

Practically, the study recommends that Toco prioritise application stability improvements (particularly search functionality), implement a contributor leaderboard as a low-cost mechanism for triggering initial community activity, develop seller notification systems that attribute community-sourced traffic and transactions, and adopt differentiated activation strategies for sellers with established external community ecosystems, the priority is optimising the discovery-to-transaction pathway. For sellers without established external community ecosystems, the priority is platform-initiated activation support.

Theoretically, the study recommends that future applications of the Expansion Engine examine ecosystem maturity as an explicit contextual condition in new entrant marketplace. Research on other community segments within Toco, particularly segments with less established external community ecosystems, would allow direct comparison of how the framework operates under different initial conditions. Longitudinal research on whether the early indicators of value integration identified here develop into consistent mechanisms as the platform matures would further enrich the framework's empirical base.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors thank the management and operational team of PT Toco Ramai Digital for their willingness to participate in this study. Gratitude is also extended to all seller and buyer participants who generously shared their experiences and perspectives.

DECLARATION ON THE USE OF AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

AI was used solely to improve the grammar, language clarity, and readability of the manuscript. The tool was not used for data generation, analysis, interpretation, or the development of the research content. All revisions were reviewed and verified by the authors.

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Appendix A Analytical Protocol and Evidence Sources

The following matrix documents how each Expansion Engine component was examined. It distinguishes observed descriptive evidence from participant accounts and does not treat any single source as representative of all platform users.

Component	Case indicator	Evidence source and interpretation
Digital enabler	Search, checkout, notifications, interaction venue	Interview accounts; platform-wide archival snapshots (Oct-Dec 2025); focused TCG observation (Jan-May 2026); public reviews, version history, and feedback portal.
Value exchange	Information, knowledge, trust, and social support	Interview accounts and coded post content in eight TCG communities. Counts of posts, likes, and replies are descriptive within the observation window.
Value integration	Community-to-reputation and community-to-transaction linkage	Interview accounts, observed post-to-store pathway, and platform-management/operational accounts. The authors' purchase is treated as researcher observation, not evidence of organic conversion.
Interpretive process	Open, axial, and selective coding	Source- and date-organised materials; iterative coding aligned to the three components; cross-source checking and selective member checking.