

China E-commerce Sector

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DBS Group Research . Equity

3 Oct 2023

Is growth momentum sustainable into 2H23 amid macro uncertainty?

- **Consumption downgrade in fact benefits e-commerce platforms given their low-price strategy; expect leading e-commerce to outperform overall retail growth**
- **Competition remains rational, as reflected by steady margin**
- **Online penetration rate stood at only 27% if excluding product returns, representing further room to grow**
- **Prefer [PDD \(PDD US\)](#) to [Alibaba \(9988 HK\)](#) and [JD.com \(9618 HK\)](#), thanks to its stronger revenue growth profile supported by its focus on low-price strategy**

Riding on consumption downgrade. Leading China e-commerce companies reported revenue-beating results in 2Q23, thanks to consumption downgrade. Looking ahead, online shopping is favoured amid economic uncertainty as prices of products sold on online channels are c.5-15% lower than that of traditional brick-and-mortar outlets. E-commerce platforms have also been enriching product offerings and prioritising value-for-money products to cater to this rising demand.

Rising online penetration with rational competition. The online penetration rate in China stood at only 27% if we use net Gross Merchandise Value "GMV" (vs. c.40% based on gross GMV), taking into account a 30-50% product return rate. This suggests further room to grow, with our sector growth rate projection of c.10% p.a. during 2023-2025. Competition remains rational, as demonstrated by the robust revenue and yet stable margin in 2Q23. Facing competition from Douyin and PDD, Alibaba has stepped up investment into its live streaming and affordable product offering, supporting steady revenue growth in Taobao and Tmall.

Prefer PDD > Alibaba > JD.com. We remain bullish on the medium-term revenue and earnings outlook for e-commerce players. We expect Alibaba, JD.com, and PDD's e-commerce segment to deliver 10%, 4%, and 48% y-o-y revenue growth, respectively, in 3Q23. We prefer PDD to Alibaba and JD.com, as it benefits the most from rising demand for value products and has the strongest growth profile supported by its focus on low-price strategy. Alibaba's revenue growth will be more driven by local consumer services, Cainiao as well as Digital Media and Entertainment segment. Profitability will be enhanced with narrower loss from non-e-commerce segments. Maintain BUY.

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Recommendation & valuation

Company	Currency	Price	Target	Recom	Mkt Cap
		Local\$	Local\$		
Alibaba (9988 HK)	HKD	85.60	169	BUY	222,720
JD.com (9618 HK)	HKD	115.10	265	BUY	46,737
PDD (PDD US)	USD	99.67	159	BUY	131,523

Source: Thomson Reuters, DBS Bank (Hong Kong) Limited ("DBS HK")

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Introduction

Leading e-commerce companies Alibaba (9988 HK), JD.com (9618 HK), and PDD (PDD US) registered stronger-than-expected revenue growth in 2Q23. PDD's revenue increased by 66% y-o-y, while Alibaba's Taobao and Tmall segment revenue grew 12% y-o-y, with CMR rising by 10% y-o-y, reversing the downtrend seen in the past four consecutive quarters. JD.com's retail revenue increased by 5% y-o-y. While the market was excited about the growth recovery, there were also concerns about its sustainability amid the

sluggish macro environment as well as the potential heating up of competition.

2Q23 results analysis

The market beating 2Q23 performance was supported by the consumption downgrade as well as the successful execution of individual companies' respective strategies, e.g., JD.com's Rmb10bn in subsidies and Alibaba's investment in enriching its low-price product offerings.

Quarterly revenue growth of leading e-commerce platforms (y-o-y change)

	1Q21	2Q21	3Q21	4Q21	1Q22	2Q22	3Q22	4Q22	1Q23	2Q23
Alibaba (China commerce)	21%	45%	-19%	36%	-3%	-1%	3%	-1%	-3%	12%
JD.com (JD retail)	35%	23%	23%	21%	17%	4%	7%	4%	-2%	5%
PDD	239%	89%	51%	3%	7%	36%	65%	46%	58%	66%

Note: Alibaba's 2Q23 growth is based on Taobao Tmall Group segment, due to changes of segment disclosure

Source: Companies, DBS HK

Alibaba. Taobao and Tmall revenue increased by 12% y-o-y (vs. market expectations of 8%) in 2Q23, with CMR rising by 10% y-o-y, reversing the downtrend seen over the past four quarters. Segment EBITA grew by 9% y-o-y, with the margin slightly contracting from 44% to 43% in the quarter ended Jun. Management explained that the company **stepped up investment to enhance the user experience** of and, in turn, traffic to the Taobao app over the past few quarters, which started yielding positive results in 2Q23. International digital commerce, Local Services, Cainiao as well as Digital Media and Entertainment segment revenue grew by 41%, 30%, 34% and 36% y-o-y respectively. They are the key drivers for group revenue growth.

grew by 31% y-o-y, with operating income increasing to Rmb510m, compared with 2Q22's Rmb36m.

PDD. Revenue surged 66% y-o-y, exceeding market expectations by 22%, thanks to its **successful execution of its low-price strategy** amid economic uncertainty. Besides, expansion of its overseas e-commerce platform Temu contributed to transaction services revenue.

JD.com. JD retail revenue rose 5% y-o-y, vs. market expectations of 3%. If we were to exclude the short-term impact from strategic adjustments (streamlining SKUs), the growth rate should be a double-digit percentage. Management shared that **GMV growth was actually a few percentage points higher than revenue growth**. There were also seasonal factors that dictated price cuts for certain branded products, which stimulated buying interest in 2Q23. The JD retail margin remains at a stable level of 3.2%, vs. 3.4% in 2Q22 and 4.6% in 1Q23. JD Logistics revenue

Market share of leading e-commerce platforms

	2021	2022	2023F
Alibaba	52%	47%	44%
JD.com	20%	19%	18%
PDD	16%	17%	19%
Others	13%	17%	20%

Note 1: Market share is based on net GMV

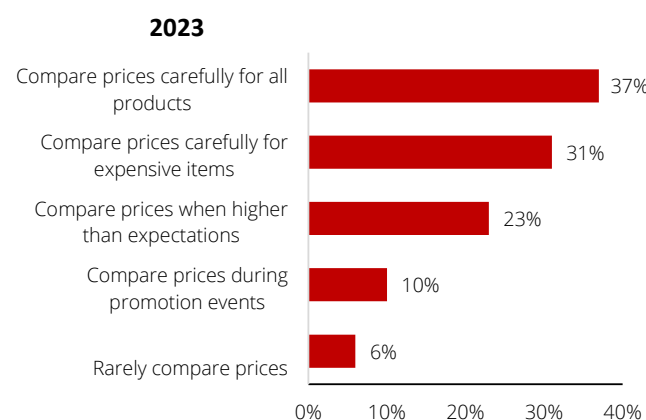
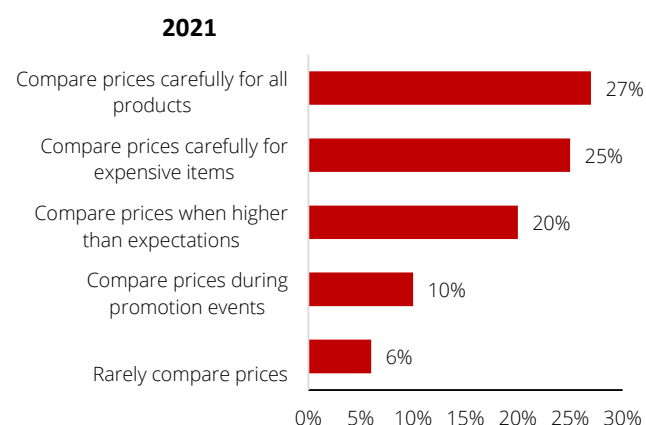
Note 2: Others include live streaming platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou

Source: Companies, DBS HK

3Q23 outlook

Consumption downgrade. The market is expecting a consumption downgrade amid macroeconomic uncertainty. According to Syntun survey, Chinese consumers are becoming more price-sensitive and cautious on consumption spending in 2023, with 68% now rigorously comparing prices in their daily shopping, marking a 12% increase from 2021. This signals a preference for channels that offering products with competitive prices. E-commerce platforms are, by nature, “go-to” channels where customers seek for low-price or affordable products, especially unbranded clothing, cosmetics, and daily necessities. Pricing on e-commerce platforms is generally 5-15% lower than that of traditional brick-and-mortar outlets. PDD has been focusing on a “low-price strategy”. Alibaba and JD.com started prioritising value-for-money offerings to cater to rising consumption demand.

Consumer price comparison behaviour (2021 vs 2023)



Note: A high proportion indicates that more people tend to choose this option during the survey

Source: Syntun, DBS HK

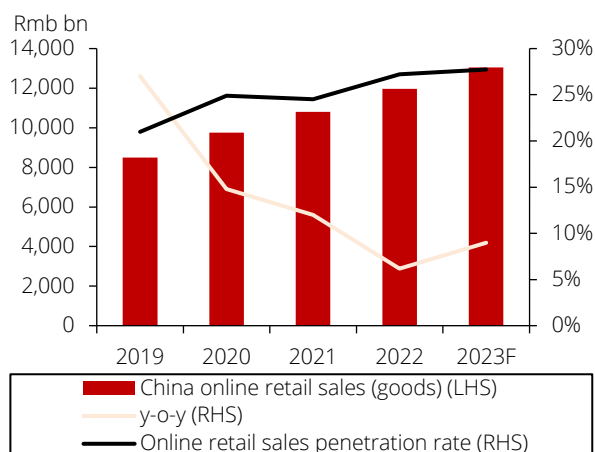
Online penetration. Some investors are concerned about the long-term growth outlook amid the currently high online penetration. If we were to use leading e-commerce platforms’ reported GMVs, online penetration in China stood at c.40%. However, we cross-checked this against internet companies and understand from the market that the product return ratio could be high in certain categories (as much as 50%). Thus, the net GMV (paid and fulfilled) could be 30-50% lower than gross GMV. The penetration rate should stand at just 27% in 2022, based on net GMV.

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Our sector growth forecast of c.10% p.a. during 2023-2025 looks feasible.

commerce market size will reach c.Rmb7 trillion, or account for 30% of online retail sales in 2025, up from 20% in 2022, which implies 27% p.a. revenue growth during 2022-2025.

China online retail sales penetration rate



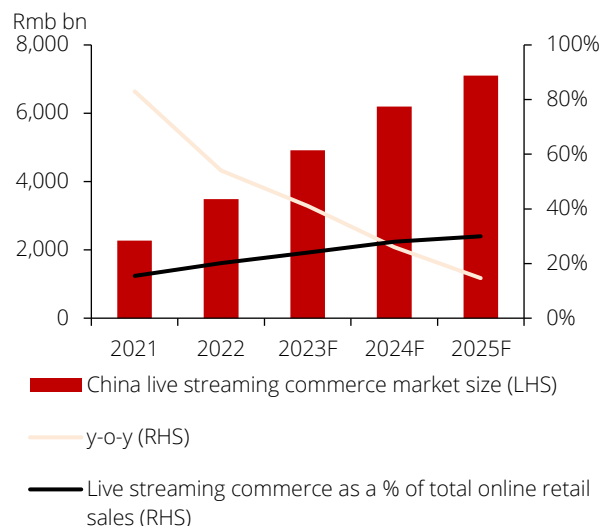
Source: NBS, DBS HK

Competition. We spoke with a few internet companies recently and concluded that the competition environment remains rational. The market has been concerned about potentially intensified market competition triggered by JD.com's Rmb10bn in subsidies. We believe it is more a campaign slogan. As highlighted by JD.com's management, the subsidies will be contributed by both JD.com and its merchants, and the net margin impact to JD retail is limited. As demonstrated in the 2Q23 results, leading e-commerce platforms can deliver respectable revenue growth while maintaining a steady margin. Meanwhile, e-commerce platforms are scaling down loss-making businesses which are positive to overall profitability.

On the other hand, live streaming platforms, such as Douyin and Kuaishou, are entering into the e-commerce market. Conventional e-commerce platforms such as Taobao view live streaming as an additional marketing tool. Taobao has ramped up "Taobao Live" to attract small and medium-sized merchants and KOLs to its live stream platforms, which will, in turn, lead to the retention of Taobao's user traffic and engagement.

All in all, product variety and fulfillment capability will be the key differentiators and limit the threat from live streaming platforms. In the medium term, we expect live streaming

China live streaming commerce market size



Source: Syntun, DBS HK

E-commerce revenue and net margin (2Q22 vs. 2Q23)

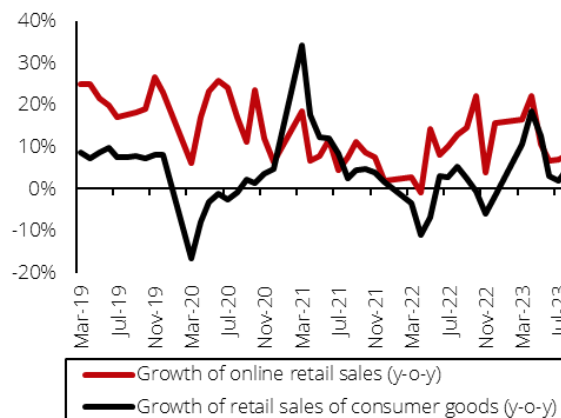
Revenue growth (y-o-y)	2Q22	2Q23
Alibaba	-0.3%	13.9%
JD.com	5.0%	8.0%
PDD	36.0%	66.3%
Adjusted net margin		
Alibaba	15.0%	19.0%
JD.com	2.4%	3.0%
PDD	34.0%	29.0%

Source: Companies, DBS HK

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Retail sales. Retail sales growth in July and Aug was 2% y-o-y and 5% y-o-y, respectively, reflecting a slowdown from 2Q23's 11%. Online retail sales growth remained solid at 8% y-o-y in Aug. We expect online retail sales y-o-y growth will be moderated in 3Q23, but it should continue to outpace overall retail sales.

China online retail sales vs. overall retail sales



Source: NBS, DBS HK

Operating matrices of leading e-commerce platforms

	Alibaba	JD.com	PDD
GMV in 2022 (Rmb bn)	8,116	3,484	3,040
Annual active customer (m)	903	570	869
ARPU (Rmb)	8,479	6,068	3,360
Adjusted net margin	16%	3%	30%
Category focus	Apparel, cosmetics, home appliances	Electronics, home appliances, FMCG	Fresh grocery, daily necessities
Strength	Wide product range with small focusing on high-quality products and Taobao providing diversified products	Self-built fulfillment infrastructure, and strong supply chain management in 3C products	Low-price strategy and white-label products

Note: The figures are based on FY22 financial data, and Alibaba's figures are based on FY3/2023 financial data

Source: Companies, DBS HK

Conclusion and valuation

Looking ahead, we expect Alibaba, JD.com, and PDD's e-commerce segments to deliver 10%, 4%, and 48% y-o-y revenue growth, respectively, in 3Q23. The growth rate will be slightly moderated from 2Q23, given the low base in 2Q22. However, the medium-term momentum will remain healthy, supported by creative content and enhanced product offerings. We prefer PDD due to its stronger growth profile supported by its low-price strategy that is favoured amid economic uncertainty. Bearing the quarterly volatility, we remain bullish on FY24 and FY25 outlook. In terms of valuation, we are inclined to use PE as the core of the valuation matrix, given that earnings are more sustainable and predictable going forward.

Valuation of leading e-commerce platforms

	P/S	P/GMV	P/E	2023-25 earnings CAGR	2023-25 revenue CAGR
Alibaba	1.1	0.2	8.2	17%	12%
JD.com	0.3	0.1	9.4	17%	10%
PDD	3.6	0.2	12.7	25%	22%

Note: The ratio is based on FY24 financial data and FY3/25 for Alibaba; Earnings refers to the adjusted earnings

Source: Companies, DBS HK

Alibaba. We forecast China e-commerce to grow by 10% y-o-y and 10% y-o-y for 2QFY3/24 and FY3/24, respectively; and overall revenue to grow by 11% y-o-y and 14% y-o-y for 2QFY3/24 and FY3/24, respectively. Other growth drivers include its international commerce business, where AliExpress's Choice 1P is inflating revenue (compared with the 3P business previously), local services (mainly Ele.me), Cainiao as well as Digital Media and Entertainment segment. Note that some non-e-commerce segments are still loss making except Cainiao and Digital Media and Entertainment segment where EBITA contribution was 2% and <1% respectively to the group as of 1QFY3/24.

We forecast non-GAAP net profit to increase by 16% to Rmb186bn in FY3/24. Maintain BUY with TPs of HK\$169/US\$171 based on SOTP methodology. (1) Core commerce: 15x PE on FY3/24F core commerce earnings (HK\$142); (2) cloud: 3x price-to-sales on FY3/24F (HK\$13); (3) local services: 3x P/S on FY3/24F (HK\$10); (4) Cainiao: 1x P/S on FY3/24F (HK\$4). Note that Alibaba has recently announced the IPO of Cainiao Logistics at an estimated valuation of US\$20bn, based on news reporting. If we were to apply 66% shareholdings, it will be translated into HK\$5

per share of Alibaba, representing a slight upside to our current assigned valuation of HK\$4 per share.

JD.com. We forecast JD retail to grow by 3% y-o-y and 3% y-o-y for 3Q23 and FY23, respectively, and overall revenue to grow by 4% y-o-y and 5% y-o-y for 3Q23 and FY23, respectively. We expect the JD retail margin to improve to 4.7% y-o-y in 3Q23 (vs. 2Q23's 3.2%). We expect non-GAAP net profit to increase by 27% y-o-y to Rmb36bn in FY23 and 19% y-o-y to Rmb43bn in FY24. Maintain BUY with TPs of HK\$265 /US\$67 based on (1) core retail business valuation: 10x PE on FY24F core profit (HK\$149) and (2) fair value of other investees (HK\$116).

PDD. We forecast revenue will grow by 49% y-o-y to 3Q23 and 55% y-o-y in FY23. Management re-iterated that its overseas business Temu is still at the exploration stage, and no operating matrices will be disclosed in the near term. We expect PDD's net margin will remain at 20%+ over the next few years. Maintain BUY with TP of US\$159, premised on 20x FY24 non-GAAP net profit, on the back of 25% p.a. earnings growth during FY23F-FY25F.

Share price performance

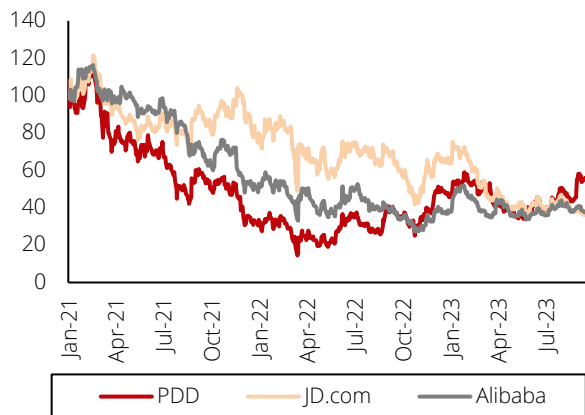
Share price performance (%)	1-mth	3-mth	6-mth	12-mth	YTD
Alibaba Group (9988 HK)	(5.8)	4.1	(9.5)	11.4	(0.8)
JD.com (9618 HK)	(14.0)	(13.4)	(27.7)	(43.0)	(47.7)
PDD (PDD US)	5.2	42.3	34.6	61.4	20.3
HSI Index	(3.6)	(5.9)	(11.8)	3.8	(10.0)
HSTECH Index	(7.4)	(0.3)	(7.7)	12.6	(5.0)

Source: Thomson Reuters

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Share price performance

Rebased 1-Jan-2021 = 100



Source: Thomson Reuters

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STRONG BUY (>20% total return over the next 3 months, with identifiable share price catalysts within this time frame)

BUY (>15% total return over the next 12 months for small caps, >10% for large caps)

HOLD (-10% to +15% total return over the next 12 months for small caps, -10% to +10% for large caps)

FULLY VALUED (negative total return, i.e., > -10% over the next 12 months)

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*Share price appreciation + dividends

Completed Date: 3 Oct 2023 15:09:38 (HKT)

Dissemination Date: 3 Oct 2023 16:58:13 (HKT)

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