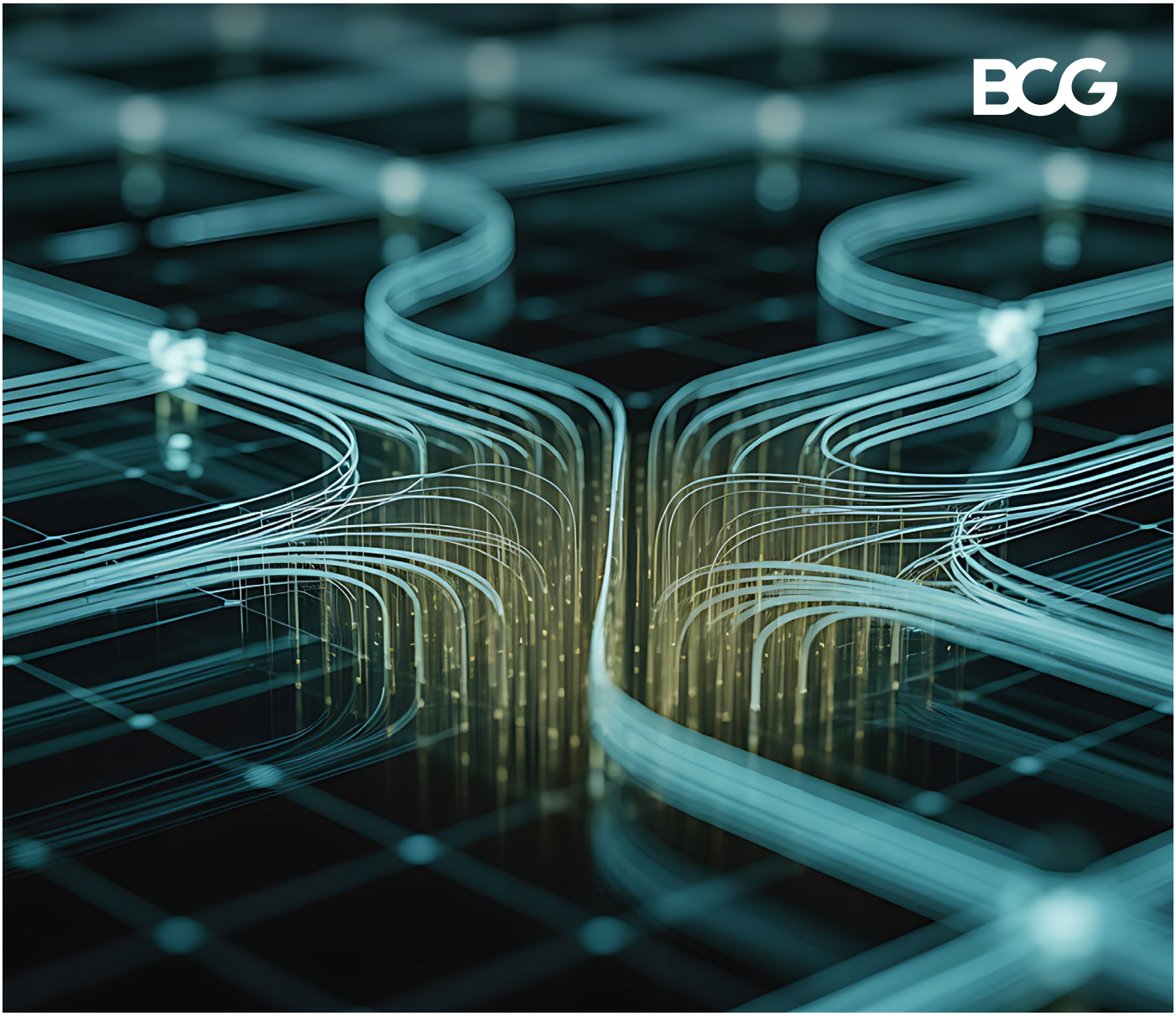


WHITE PAPER

Stablecoin Payments

The Truth Behind the Numbers

January 2026
By Inderpreet Batra, Max Zevin, Ankit Mathur, Cláudio Quitete, Carlos Bravo, and Dawson Li

Stablecoin Payments

The Truth Behind the Numbers

Executive Summary

In linking the speed and efficiency of blockchain infrastructure with traditional financial systems, digital currency appears poised to lead the next wave of innovation in money movement. Stablecoins are a major component of this story. But outside financial infrastructure and cryptocurrency trading, how much impact are they really having? In a unique collaboration, BCG and Allium Labs set out to discover the reality behind the hype[1]. Our research reveals that only a small proportion of stablecoin activity today drives real economy payments. On the other hand, an annual growth rate of 60% suggests a significant runway for digital assets in some use cases. There is much to play for as the industry continues to evolve.

Public blockchain data suggests there is more than $62 trillion of stablecoin transfers annually, but our analysis reveals that real economic activity amounts to just $4.2 trillion, or about 7% of the total. In short, the vast majority of stablecoin activity relates to trading, derivative collateral transfers, protocol mechanics, and intermediary routing, rather than payments for goods and services.

For our initial sizing, we use a conservative, behavior-based methodology. This reveals that in 2025, there was approximately $350–$550 billion of observable bilateral payments for goods and services. We exclude large categories of off-chain usage, including internal exchange settlements and stablecoin card-based payments. As such, the numbers should be interpreted as directionally robust lower bounds. In future, we intend to expand our digital asset flows dataset, adding additional coverage and more in-depth analysis.

Our research also distinguishes between goods and services payments initiated by businesses and those initiated by consumers. B2B payments account for about 40% of real economy payments and are growing at a rate of 65% per year. C2C payments account for about 25% and are expanding at about 75% annually. (**See Exhibit 1**).

While overall real economy stablecoin flows are minor when set against the $200 trillion global payments market, the trend is positive. Use cases tend to emerge where traditional payment rails face structural inefficiencies, including cross-border settlement timing, high FX costs, trapped liquidity, delayed finality, or complex payout workflows.

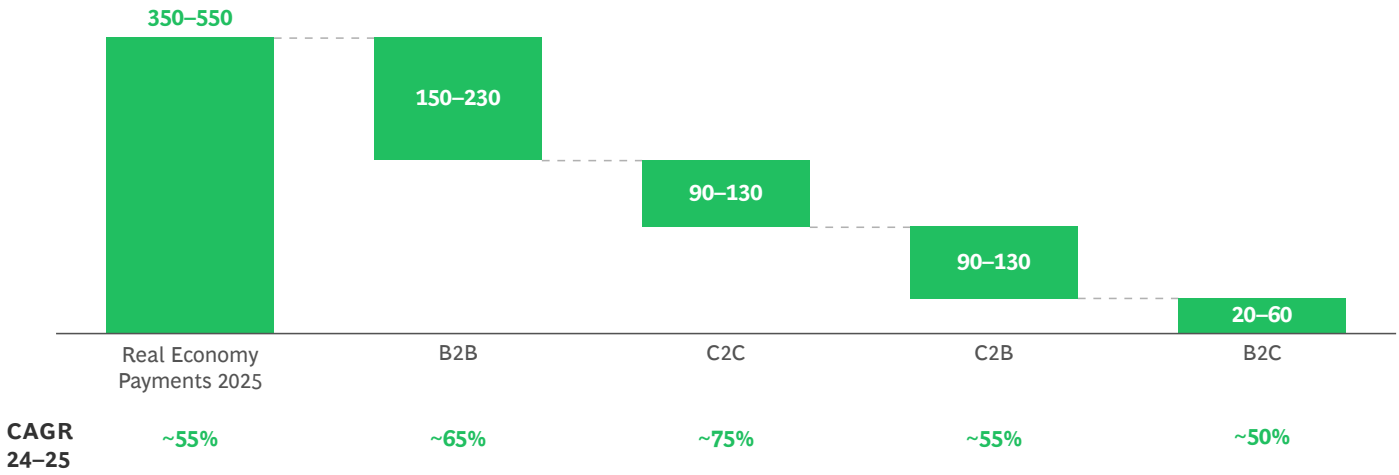
As stablecoin real world payments grow, albeit from a low base, the blockchains preferred for payments are changing. In 2025, TRON remained the dominant rail by volume (accounting for about $235–375 billion of transactions), but our analysis shows incremental growth is increasingly driven by larger, more regulated entities, favoring chains such as BNB Smart Chain (~$35–50B), Ethereum (~$20–35B), Solana (~$20–35B), and Polygon (~$8-10B). This reflects a shift from pure cost minimization toward a multi-rail interoperable settlement model, where compliance, programmability, analytics, and institutional trust are seen as equally as important as fees .

1. Allium is a blockchain data provider with coverage across more than 1,000 stablecoins and multiple major blockchains.

EXHIBIT 1

B2B payments are most prominent on-chain

USD B, Jan 2025 to Dec 2025



Source: Allium database, BCG analysis.

Solving the Stablecoin Payments Puzzle

Stablecoins sit within a broader landscape of digital assets that includes tokenized deposits, central bank digital currencies, and other blockchain-based instruments. Within this ecosystem, stablecoins have emerged as a practical bridge between on-chain systems and traditional finance, in some cases driving tangible real-world benefits incremental to existing payment methods.

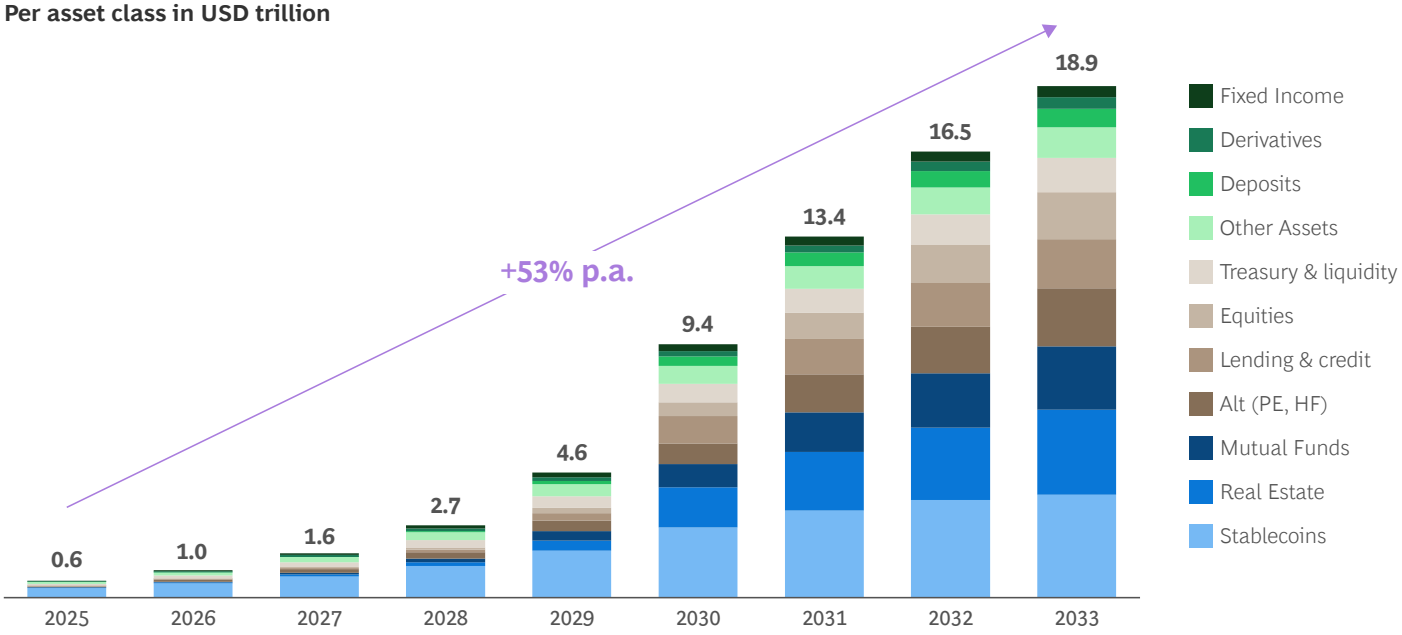
As of December 2025, stablecoin market capitalization exceeded $307 billion, roughly 50% higher than in the same period the previous year. Growth was supported by increasing regulatory clarity across major jurisdictions (including the U.S., Canada, Europe, Singapore, and the UAE). We expect digital assets to grow 53% per year until 2033. (**See Exhibit 2**).

Meanwhile, major platforms are operationalizing their stablecoin strategies. And payments companies, fintechs, and banks are integrating stablecoins into payouts, cross-border settlement, and treasury workflows. That said, estimates of volumes of "stablecoin payments" vary dramatically—from tens of billions to over a trillion dollars. The reason is that estimates often rely on different definitions and data sources. Survey-based approaches offer depth but limited coverage. Top-down blockchain metrics capture scale but fail to distinguish payments from trading or internal routing. This divergence reflects not just data gaps, but a classification problem. Without a consistent taxonomy for economic intent, fundamentally different behaviors continue to be grouped under the same "payment" label.

EXHIBIT 2

Digital assets are growing fast, fueled by public and private investment

Per asset class in USD trillion



Source: Ripple and BCG "Approaching the Tokenization Tipping Point" report from April 2025.

How Blockchain Data Represents Stablecoin Activity

Public blockchains are transparent by design: every transfer, timestamp, and amount is visible. However, blockchains record how value moves, not why it moves. Wallets are pseudonymous, transaction metadata is minimal, and economically distinct actions can look identical at a transaction level. (**See Exhibit 3**). By contrast, traditional payment systems embed rich contextual metadata—merchant type, transaction purpose, reversals, settlement status—which allows intent to be directly observed.

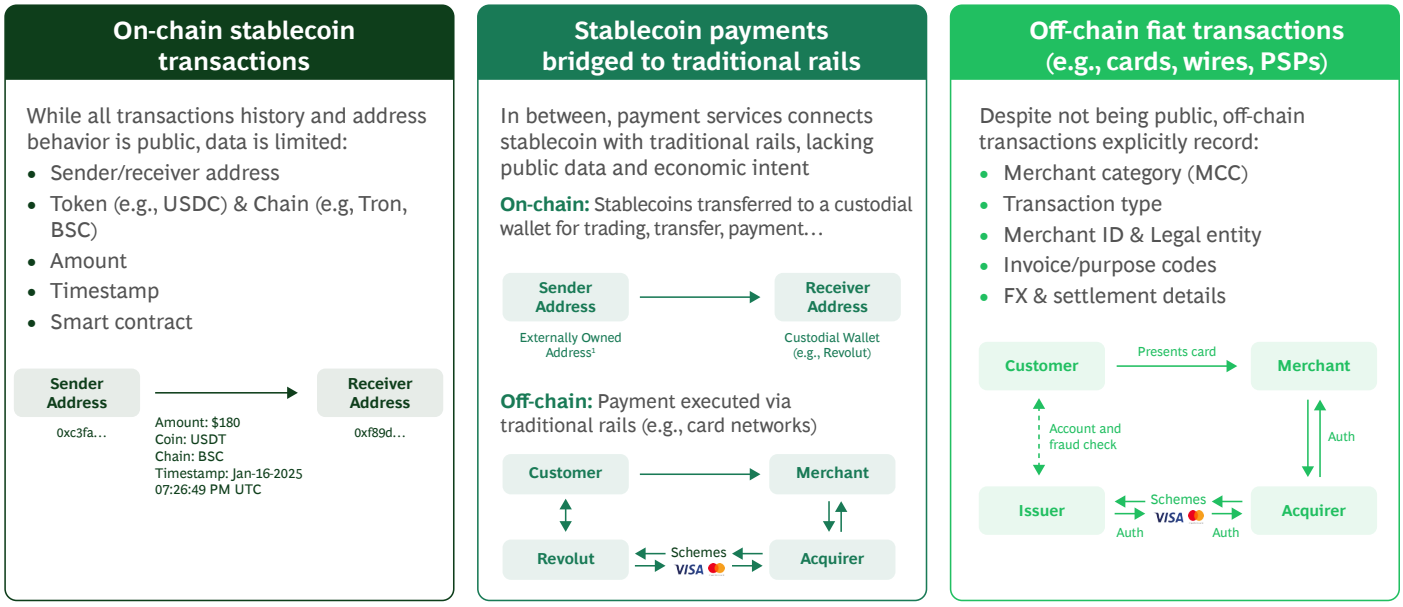
Due to these dynamics, raw blockchain metrics such as total transfer volume or transaction count materially overstate meaningful economic activity. They capture settlement mechanics rather than use cases, and cannot, on their own, distinguish payments from trading, treasury movements, or protocol operations. The core analytical challenge is therefore not visibility, but interpretation.

Pattern Identification as the Basis for On-Chain Analytics

Because economic intent is not explicitly encoded on-chain, pattern identification is the primary enabler of stablecoin analytics. As with traditional transaction monitoring, classification relies on repeatable behavioral signals rather than declared purpose. These include transaction size, frequency, flow symmetry, counterparty diversity, and temporal consistency.

EXHIBIT 3

Despite every transaction being published on an open blockchain, on-chain data doesn't explicitly encode economic intent



Source: BCG analysis.
[1]Externally Owned Address (EOA) : On-chain address controlled by private keys.

Key On-Chain Entities and mechanisms

- **Centralized exchange (CEX):** A custodial trading platform where user balances and most trading activities are settled off-chain on internal ledgers. On-chain transactions primarily reflect deposits, withdrawals, and internal wallet rebalancing rather than end-user economic activity. *Examples: Binance, Coinbase, Crypto.com, Kraken*
- **Decentralized exchange (DEX):** A smart-contract-based trading venue where asset swaps and liquidity provision occur directly on-chain. Stablecoins interacting with DEXs are typically converted into liquidity positions or collateral, meaning inflows do not imply payment activity. *Examples: Uniswap, Curve, PancakeSwap, Raydium*
- **Externally owned address (EOA):** A blockchain account controlled by a private key and not governed by smart-contract code. EOAs may be controlled by individuals, businesses, or custodial platforms and should not be assumed to map one-to-one with economic actors. *Examples: MetaMask, Trust Wallet, Phantom; exchange-controlled wallets*
- **Custodial wallet:** A digital asset wallet through which a third party, such as an exchange, fintech, or payment platform, controls private keys on behalf of the end user. Transactions are authorized and settled through the custodian's internal systems rather than directly by the user.
- **Automated market maker:** A smart contract system that enables on-chain trading by pricing assets algorithmically against pooled liquidity, rather than matching buyers and sellers through an order book.
- **Bridge:** A smart-contract system that enables assets, including stablecoins, to move between different blockchains. Rather than representing a payment or transfer between economic parties, a bridge temporarily locks, burns, or escrows a token on one chain and issues a corresponding representation on another chain.

To operationalize this approach, we partnered with Allium, a blockchain data provider with coverage across more than 1,000 stablecoins and multiple major blockchains, to develop a conservative, behavior-based framework for classifying stablecoin transfers by economic use case. One limitation of our approach is that it only captures activity that settles on public blockchains. Large categories of stablecoin usage occur predominantly off-chain and are therefore not observable, including:

- **Centralized exchange internal activity:** Overwhelmingly spot and derivatives trading settled on internal ledgers; peer-to-peer transfers exist but are marginal .

  Examples: Binance spot trading; Revolut account-to-account transfers

- **Crypto card payments:** Transactions executed on card rails using custodial stablecoin balances, where on-chain data captures only issuer inflows and outflows, which should amount to about $15 billion in 2025 according to Artermis and Visa[2].

  Examples: Coinbase card; Binance card, Crypto.com card

Because of these factors, our estimates should be interpreted as conservative relative to total stablecoin economic activity[2].

Three-step methodology

We apply a three-step approach to isolate economically meaningful stablecoin activity.

- **Step 1 — Remove non-economic activity:** We exclude bot-driven transactions, protocol mechanics (e.g., pre-minting, bridges, internal contract calls), and intermediary routing such as automated market maker hops.

- **Step 2 — Infer economic use cases:** Unlike traditional payments analytics, which map intent using identity and metadata, the analysis infers use cases from observable wallet behavior, including sender–receiver dynamics, transaction sizes, frequency, counterparty breadth, and timing patterns. (**See Exhibit 4**).

- **Step 3 — Apply conservative classification:** Ambiguous activity is intentionally classified as investment or trading rather than payments. This creates a bias toward understatement of real-economy usage.

How Much Stablecoin Volume is Actually Payments?

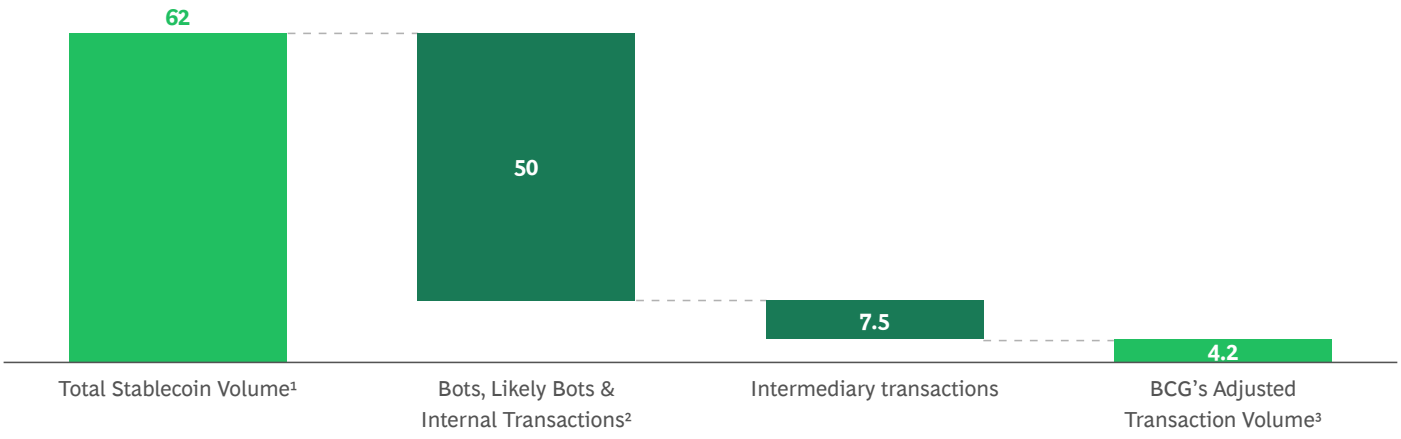
Of approximately $62 trillion of gross stablecoin transfer volume in 2025, only $4.2 trillion remains after removing non-economic activity. We use this figure as the basis for all subsequent analysis. (**See Exhibit 5**). We also classify transfers into five primary categories based on observable wallet behavior and transaction patterns.

2. Assumption based on Artemis “Stablecoin Update: October 2025” estimated at ~$18B card payments less the Visa $3.5B on-chain stablecoin volume included in our analysis already.

EXHIBIT 4

Stablecoin on chain transaction volumes are dominated by bots and internal transactions

USD T, Jan 2025 to Dec 2025

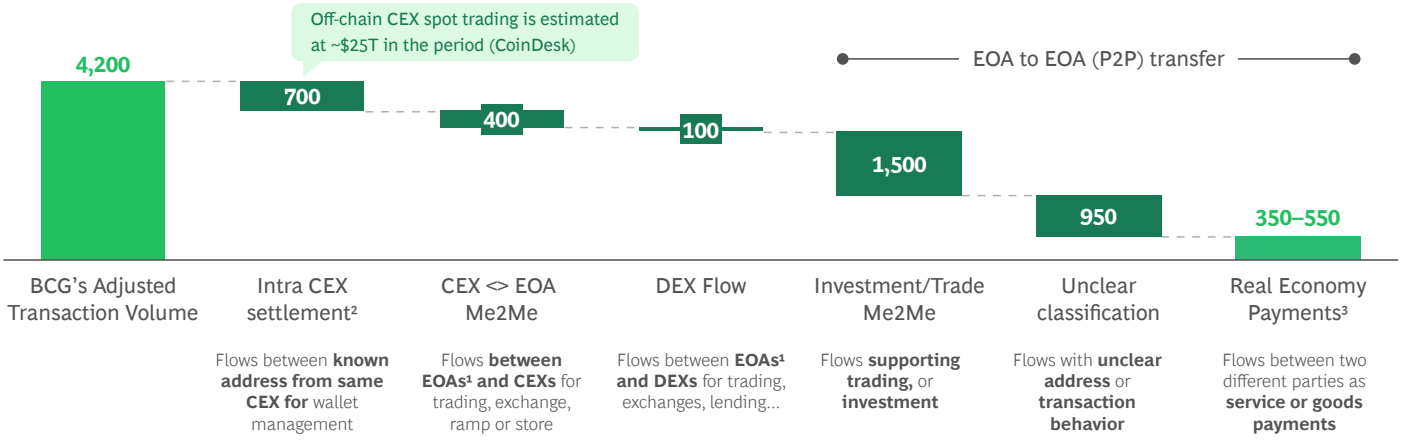


Source: Allium database, BCG analysis.
¹Removes anomaly transactions (e.g. >1e18, Paxos 300T mint).
²Excludes mapped synthetic, bridged, or pre-minted tokens; known bots activities and wallets with 1000+ txns or $10M+ volume in any 30-days due to potential bot activity.
³Only considers the largest transfer in a transaction, removing self-transfers and intermediary transfers within the transaction (e.g., Uniswap transaction have multiple smart contract and intermediaries transfer to execute a transaction).

EXHIBIT 5

Investment and trade dominate on-chain adjusted volumes

USD B, Jan 2025 to Dec 2025



Sources: Allium database, CoinDesk Exchange Review November 2025; BCG analysis.
¹Externally Owned Address (EOA) : On-chain address controlled by private keys.
²Most of CEX trade and transactions are settled off-chain through CEX internal ledger and it's not captured in this exercise.
³Stablecoin payments settled in card rails such as crypto card are not registered on-chain and it's not captured in this exercises (e.g., Revolut).

First, we divide approximate volumes by venue:

- **Centralized Exchanges - CEX (~~$~~1,100 billion):** Transfers involving over 130 mapped centralized exchanges fall into two distinct patterns:
  - **Intra CEX settlements (~~$~~700 billion):** These flows are mostly economically neutral and reflect exchange internal liquidity management, including movements between online/hot wallets used for daily operations and offline/cold wallets used for asset custody and risk management.
  - **CEX <> EOA (~~$~~400 billion):** These transfers represent users depositing and withdrawing from the centralized trading infrastructure. We note a structural imbalance; the data shows about ~~$~~400 billion in deposits but just ~~$~~5 billion in withdrawals. The reason is that stablecoins habitually enter exchanges once and are then reused internally for trading and derivatives, with most gains and losses settling on internal ledgers and only a small share of returns exiting.
- **Decentralized exchanges - DEX (~~$~~100 billion):** Activity involving users sending stablecoins from self-custodied wallets to on-chain trading protocols.
  - Stablecoins entering DEXs are typically not returned as stablecoins. Instead, they are locked into liquidity pools or used as trading collateral, with users receiving liquidity positions or non-stable assets in return. As a result, stablecoin inflows (~~$~~90 billion) materially exceed outflows (~~$~~10 billion).
- **Investment/trading (~~$~~1.5 trillion):** This category captures short-term, reversible flows or transaction patterns inconsistent with payment behavior, such as for wallet management or store as value. Typical signals include rapid inflow-outflow cycles, irregular transaction sizing, and high temporal clustering.
  - Importantly, this category reflects only on-chain activity. Most stablecoin trading, particularly spot trading and derivatives, occurs off-chain on centralized platforms, and is therefore not observable. For context, CoinDesk Exchange Review reports ~~$~~25 trillion in spot trading and ~~$~~75 trillion in derivatives trading on centralized exchanges between December 2024 and November 2025.
- **Real economy payments (~~$~~350–550 billion):** This category represents payments for goods and services between economically distinct parties. The flows are directional, non-reversible, and recurring, consistent with commercial and personal payment activity. While volumes are small relative to global payments, they expanded about 60% between 2024 and 2025.
- **Unclear classification (~~$~~950 billion):** Here we allocate activity that cannot be confidently attributed to any category, often due to insufficient history, anomalous behavior, or atypical transaction patterns. These flows are deliberately excluded from payments estimates, so that our results remain analytically conservative.

Our categorization highlights a critical distinction: most stablecoin activity supports financial market infrastructure rather than payments. But while real-economy payments represent a minority share, they are growing rapidly and concentrated in use cases where traditional payment rails are structurally inefficient.

Segmentation of Real-Economy Stablecoin Payments

Beyond identifying real-economy payments in aggregate, we segment payment flows into B2B, C2C, C2B, and B2C categories. Using behavioral patterns as a starting point, we cross reference against external data sources and validate through discussions with industry participants. While inherently probabilistic, we believe our analysis provides a robust directional view of how stablecoins are used for payments today. We will refine our analysis as coverage expands and additional off-chain data becomes available.

The payments distribution reflects where stablecoins solve the most acute economic frictions, which today are in high-value, cross-border, and treasury-driven settlement, rather than everyday retail scenarios. Differences across segments are driven by transaction economics (ticket size, urgency), structural inefficiencies in traditional payment rails, and behavioral patterns observable on-chain.

B2B payments (about 40% of the total)

B2B payments represent the largest share of real economy stablecoin volumes. That's because B2B transfer needs align most directly with stablecoins' core advantages: 24x7/365, speed, finality, and USD settlement without correspondent banking. These benefits are particularly valuable for activities including liquidity pooling, treasury positioning, and intercompany funding, especially when traditional banking rails are closed, such as at weekends and during holidays. In addition, cross-border supplier settlement and platform-to-merchant payouts are favored, especially in contexts where traditional correspondent banking introduces delays, FX costs, and trapped liquidity.

We identified on-chain B2B flows through ticket sizes, directional and non-reversible transfers, low counterparty diversity, and recurring payment patterns consistent with invoice settlement.

C2C stablecoin payments (about 25% of the total)

C2C payments are primarily driven by cross-border remittances and peer-to-peer transfers, particularly in regions with limited access to USD banking, volatile local currencies, or expensive remittance corridors. In these contexts, stablecoins provide a faster, cheaper, and more reliable alternative to traditional money transfers and informal cash networks.

Methodologically, C2C flows are characterized by high transaction counts, smaller average ticket sizes, and broad counterparty diversity, resulting in a meaningful share of payment activity but a lower share of aggregate value relative to B2B.

C2B stablecoin payments (about 25% of the total)

C2B payments consist of consumers paying businesses for digital and cross-border services, often where traditional card acceptance may be limited, costly, or operationally complex. These flows are most common in sectors such as gaming, gambling, online subscriptions, and digital services with globally distributed customer bases.

On-chain, C2B payments are characterized by moderate ticket sizes, one-directional flows to business wallets, and recurring transaction behavior, distinguishing them from trading or treasury activity.

B2C stablecoin payments (about 10% of the total)

B2C payments account for the smallest share of real economy stablecoin volume. They include business-to-individual payouts such as contractor payments, creator earnings, refunds, and rebates. While conceptually well-suited to stablecoin programmability and global reach, adoption remains constrained by effective domestic fiat payout rails, regulatory considerations, tax treatment, and the strength of domestic fiat payment rails in developed markets.

On-chain, B2C flows are identified through recurring outbound payments from business wallets to a wide range of individual wallets, typically with moderate ticket sizes. Adoption is most visible among Web3-native companies and global platforms paying distributed workforces or creators.

Chain Dynamics: Where Stablecoin Payments Settle

Our analysis of real-economy payment flows by blockchain shows that TRON is the dominant settlement rail in absolute terms, with 60–80% of flows driven by ultra-low transaction fees and deep USDT liquidity. These characteristics make TRON highly effective for high-frequency, price-sensitive transfers such as remittances and peer-to-peer payments. However, TRON's share of real economy stablecoin payment volumes declined from about 74% in January 2025 to about 60% by year-end, even as absolute volumes continued to grow.

This shift reflects incremental growth patterns. New volume is increasingly driven by larger, more regulated institutions and platform-integrated use cases, rather than informal retail flows.

Institutional and enterprise payment models, such as platform payouts, B2B settlement, and app-embedded payments prioritize trust, compliance, operational integration, and analytics, alongside costs. These priorities favor blockchains with mature infrastructure, strong ecosystem support, and clearer regulatory signaling, in addition to smart-contract capabilities. As a result, Ethereum, Solana, BNB Smart Chain, and Polygon are capturing a growing share of flows. Still, this represents diversification at the margins rather than displacement of the incumbent rail. It also reflects rising interoperability needs across payment and settlement workflows.

What the Data is Telling Us

Stablecoins today function primarily as financial market and settlement infrastructure, rather than as a mass-market rail. In addition, while on-chain data captures only a partial view of activity, it clearly shows that payment usage is real, growing, and concentrated in specific high-friction contexts—notably cross-border B2B settlement, remittances, and platform-driven payouts. The evolution of stablecoins as payment instruments is credible and accelerating but we have yet to see a step function change in growth. Further growth beyond niche applications will depend on deeper integration with existing financial systems, continued regulatory clarity, and improved visibility into off-chain flows.

Looking ahead, we intend to expand our digital asset flows dataset with additional coverage, complexity, and analytical fidelity. Please contact BCG or Allium if you are interested in learning more or accessing detailed insights.

Appendix:

Glossary of Key Terms

Adjusted stablecoin volume: The subset of gross stablecoin transfer volume that remains after removing non-economic activity such as bots, protocol mechanics, and intermediary routing. Represents organic, economically interpretable on-chain activity.

Ambiguous /Unattributable flows: Residual stablecoin activity that cannot be confidently classified due to atypical wallet behavior, one-off transactions, or insufficient historical context. Deliberately excluded from payment estimates to avoid overstatement.

Balance-sheet positioning: Stablecoin transfers whose primary purpose is to hold, reposition, or prepare liquidity rather than to settle a real-world obligation. Includes treasury rebalancing, exchange positioning, and store-of-value usage.

Centralized exchange (CEX): A custodial trading platform where user balances and most trading activities are settled off-chain on internal ledgers. On-chain activity primarily reflects deposits, withdrawals, and wallet rebalancing.

Custodial wallet: A wallet in which a third party controls the private keys on behalf of users. On-chain, custodial wallets often appear as EOAs despite not being user-controlled.

Decentralized exchange (DEX): A smart-contract-based trading venue where trades and liquidity provision occur on-chain. Stablecoins entering DEXs are typically transformed into liquidity positions or collateral.

Economic intent: The underlying purpose of a transaction, such as payment for goods or services, trading collateral, or treasury positioning. Economic intent is not explicitly recorded on-chain and must be inferred.

EOA (Externally owned address): An on-chain account controlled directly by a private key with no associated smart contract code. EOAs may be controlled by individuals, businesses, or centralized exchanges.

Gross stablecoin transfer volume: The total value of all stablecoin transfers observed on-chain, including protocol mechanics, intermediary routing, trading collateral movements, and payments.

Hybrid stablecoin payment (On-/Off-chain): A payment flow where stablecoins are transferred on-chain to a custodial wallet, and the payment is executed off-chain using traditional rails such as card networks or PSPs.

Intermediary routing: Temporary hops through multiple wallets or contracts within a single transaction path, such as AMM routing or bridge mechanics, which do not represent independent economic activity.

Me-2-me transfers: Transfers between wallets controlled by the same economic entity, including internal treasury movements or hot-to-cold wallet transfers. These are economically neutral.

Off-chain transaction: A transaction processed within a centralized system or payment network that is not publicly visible on a blockchain. Off-chain systems explicitly record payment intent but obscure settlement mechanics.

On-chain settlement: The final and irreversible transfer of value recorded directly on a blockchain, providing transparent and atomic settlement.

On-chain Transaction: A transfer or contract interaction recorded directly on a public blockchain, exposing settlement mechanics but not explicit economic intent.

Payment Rail: The infrastructure used to move value between parties, including blockchain networks, card networks, and correspondent banking systems.

Probabilistic Classification: A methodology that infers transaction use cases from observable behavioral patterns rather than explicit labels, preserving uncertainty through ambiguity buckets.

Real-Economy Payments: Stablecoin transactions representing payment for goods or services between economically distinct parties, inferred from wallet behavior patterns rather than identity attribution.

Self-custodial Wallet: A wallet in which the user controls the private keys and therefore has direct control over associated EOAs.

Stablecoin: A digital token issued on a blockchain designed to maintain a stable value relative to a reference asset, most commonly the U.S. dollar.

About the Authors

Inderpreet Batra is a Managing Director and Senior Partner in BCG's New York office and global head of BCG's Payments and Fintech practice. You may contact him by email at **Batra.Inderpreet@bcg.com**.

Max Zevin is a Managing Director and Partner in BCG's New York office. You may contact him by email at **Zevin.Max@bcg.com**.

Ankit Mathur is a Senior Director in BCG's Toronto office and the global lead for BCG's Payments and Fintech knowledge and research teams. You may contact him by email at **Mathur.Ankit@bcg.com**.

Cláudio Quitete is a Project Leader in BCG's Toronto office. You may contact him by email at **Quitete.Claudio@bcg.com**.

Carlos Bravo is a Director in BCG's Madrid office. You may contact him by email at **Bravo.Carlos@bcg.com**.

Dawson Li is a Senior Analyst in BCG's Toronto office. You may contact him by email at **Li.Dawson@bcg.com**.

For Further Contact

If you would like to discuss this report, please contact the authors.

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