Online Shopping Behavior: Key Dimensions and Research Synthesis

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research has emerged related to the online shopping. In this study, the current literature related to media factors that influence online shopping behavior is extensively surveyed by identifying key dimensions. Four dimensions of the online shopping channel, including informativeness, convenience, customer service, and experiential uniqueness, are proposed based on the literature review and expert judgments. In addition, these key dimensions are discussed in the context of the established traditional channel literature; and the relationships between the traditional channel behavior and online shopping behavior are discussed. This research would help investigators to compare and contrast the developments in online shopping literature and the more established traditional shopping channel literature. The potential directions of future research on online shopping are addressed too.

Keyword: Online Shopping Channel, Key Dimensions, Research Synthesis

INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research has emerged related to the choice criteria that consumers use when choosing to shop online. For example, Lee and Tan (2003) hypothesized consumer choice to shop online versus in a store was due to their efforts to maximize their utility from the purchase while minimizing risk. Alba, Lynch, Weitz, and Janiszewski (1997) proposed consumer attraction to alternative retail formats was determined by the number of alternatives considered,
the ability to screen the alternatives, the amount of information needed to select from the consideration set, ordering and fulfillment requirements, and other external benefits. Ward (2001) found consumers make decisions regarding shopping channel based on the minimization of expected transaction costs. Kaufman-Scarborough and Lindquist (2002) reported online shoppers differ their perceptions of convenience from non-online shoppers. Palmer (2000) found delivery, shopping availability, product display, time spent shopping, and price interacted to choice of retail format. A sample of the available literature as listed above shows a great variety of studies in the online shopping area. However, as the literature on online shopping phenomenon balloons, there is a need to understand the substantial underpinnings of the phenomenon. This paper is an attempt toward that end.

In particular, the contribution of this paper is mainly of three facets. First, we did a state-of-the-art review of the current body of knowledge related to media factors that influence online shopping behavior followed by identifying the key dimensions or constructs of this growing area of retail shopping. Second, we reviewed these key dimensions of online shopping behavior in the context of the established traditional channel literature and highlighted the key connections that serve as bridges between traditional and online shopping channel behavior. Third, we proposed the possible directions for the future studies in the online shopping area based on the dimensions developed in part one and the comparisons done in part two. These three facets will not only help academic researchers better understand online shopping format and where this new shopping format stands in the traditional shopping literature, but benefit those retailers who intend to develop their online business based on their brick and mortar format.

**KEY DIMENSIONS OF THE ONLINE CHANNEL**

With the growing interests in the online shopping area, more and more studies have been done to examine the different aspects of the online shopping environment. The studies have generated a large number of variables and factors. Listing all the individual variables completely would be a relatively impossible task. Even if it were possible, the complexity and sheer number of variables would have little pragmatic or academic utility. Therefore, identifying and developing a set of dimensions or constructs that classify those variables into different groups is necessary. This forms the first purpose of this study. In particular, a panel of four expert judges did a state-of-the-art literature review first based on the articles discussing different variables and factors affecting the online shopping environment excluding those studies focusing on other aspects of online shopping, such as how consumers’ off-line shopping behaviors affect their online shopping behavior, followed by classifying all the variables studied previously into different dimensions. Based on the face validity, four dimensions were identified: informativeness, customer service, convenience, and experiential uniqueness. Each of these dimensions will be discussed in turn in the following sections. Although there could be other dimensions that may influence online channel, a complete assessment of this area is difficult given that the area of research is still in its infancy and continually growing. Table 1 summarizes the literature and key variables studied in the current extant literature.
Table 1  Summary of current online literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informativeness</th>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Key Variables</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Childers, Carr, Peck, and Carson (2001)</td>
<td>Suitability of personal examination</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Muylle, Moenaert, and Despontin, 1999</td>
<td>Informativeness</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Sindhav (1999), Sindhav and Balazs (1999)</td>
<td>Logical capability, Variety of media channels, Underlying communication model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003)</td>
<td>Informativeness, Information accessibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Francis and White (2002)</td>
<td>Security, Delivery of products, Ownership conditions, Web store functionality</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon (2001)</td>
<td>Efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schlosser and Kanfer (2001)</td>
<td>Traditional marketing content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wolfinbarger and Gilly, 2003</td>
<td>Customer service, Selection, Fulfillment/Reliability, Security/Privacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>Agarwal and Venkatesh (2002)</td>
<td>Ease of use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bagozzi (1990)</td>
<td>Ease of use</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burke (2002)</td>
<td>Ease of use, Convenience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Childers, Carr, Peck, and Carson (2001)</td>
<td>Ease of use, Ease of navigation, Convenience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dabholkar (1996)</td>
<td>Ease of use, Speed of delivery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Convenience (contd.)</td>
<td>Dabholkar and Bagozzi (2002)</td>
<td>Ease of use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Francis and White (2002)</td>
<td>Product attribute descriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kaufman-Scarborough and Lindquist (2002)</td>
<td>Convenience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keeker (1997)</td>
<td>Ease of use</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spake, Beatty, Brockman, and Crutchfield (2003)</td>
<td>Convenience, ease of use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003)</td>
<td>Ease of use, Ease of navigation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 1  Summary of current online literature (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental Uniqueness</th>
<th>Level of flow</th>
<th>Usefulness</th>
<th>Fun</th>
<th>Fun</th>
<th>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Csikszentmihaly (1997)</td>
<td>Level of flow</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Childers, Carr, Peck, and Carson (2001)</td>
<td>Level of flow</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dabholkar (1996)</td>
<td>Level of flow</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dabholkar and Bagozzi (2002)</td>
<td>Level of flow</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghani and Deshpande (1994)</td>
<td>Level of flow</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon (2001)</td>
<td>Level of flow</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miyazaki and Fernandez (2001)</td>
<td>Level of flow</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novak, Hoffman, and Yung (2000)</td>
<td>Level of flow</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webster and Martocchio (1992)</td>
<td>Level of flow</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003)</td>
<td>Level of flow</td>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Intrinsic enjoyment, focused attention</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The Informativeness Dimension

One of the main advantages of online shopping is a reduction in search costs for products and search cost for product-related information (Lynch & Ariely, 2000). The Web offers an opportunity to add differential values by providing full information (Haubl & Trifts, 2000). Full information can provide a compelling online shopping experience that may improve the quality of purchase decisions (Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, 2000). Empirical research suggests that product-related information is an important decision-making variable for online purchases (Odekerken-Schroder & Wetzels, 2003). The twin advantages of reducing product search cost and providing full product information drive efficacy of the online decision-making.

According to the current literature on information, informativeness seems to be a general construct that includes information relevancy, information accuracy, information comprehensiveness, and information interactivity. Successful online shopping will occur if it meets consumers’ wants and needs (Gammack & Hodkinson, 2003). Information relevancy, information accuracy, and information comprehensiveness have been proposed to link customer satisfaction with online channel adoption (Muylle, Moenaert, & Despontin, 1999). These variables have been grouped together as information quality (Novak et al., 2000). Information comprehensiveness is a measure of the amount of information furnished by the channel. Consumers expect a certain level of information, and when the information provided by the Web approaches this level, information comprehensiveness is enhanced. Burke (2002) reported that consumers preferred using the Internet to search for information on products such as music, movies, books, and electronics, whereas in-store visits were preferred when shopping for expensive and infrequently purchased items such as appliances and furniture. This suggests that information comprehensiveness would be an important dimension for online channel preference.

The vast amount of information available over the web has no value unless there are efficient mechanisms for identifying, retrieving, and organizing them (Peterson & Merino, 2003). This relates to the relevancy and accuracy of the myriad information available on the
Web. When so much information is accessible with little effort and cost, sorting relevant information at hand is critical. Some researchers have suggested that the myriad information on the Internet is effectively countered by new developments, such as online screening and smart agents, because they help consumers to grab the most relevant information related to the consumers’ preferences (cf. Alba et al., 1997). When smart agents become smarter, information relevancy may become an unimportant issue. However, screening based on collaborative filtering may still have issues related to the information accuracy because such ratings are not always fair (Koehn, 2003).

As part of the informativeness, the high degree of interactivity between the user and the channel has also caught attention. Information interactivity may include reciprocity in the exchange of information, availability of information on demand, response contingency, customization of content, and real-time feedback (Alba et al. 1997). Interactivity may be enhanced by making the media richer by text, audio, and video channels separately or as a multiplex. Chau, Au, and Tam (2000) reported the use of graphics on webpage had better impact than text-based information. The transaction needs of consumers may be secured by emerging technology that facilitate the desired levels of engagement associated with consumer decisions (Gammack & Hodkinson, 2003). Some researchers have suggested that aesthetics in retail environments are important in fostering interactivity. Aesthetics refer to the salient visual elements of the retail environment and the entertaining or dramatic aspects (Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001). Visual and entertaining aspects of the retail environment may motivate consumption by implying a desirable consumption experience (Schmid, 1998), or offer pleasure to some specific shopping task involved in consumption (Deighton & Grayson, 1995).

The Customer Service Dimension

Customer service is one of the key dimensions for any business format to be successful. E-business cannot miss this. Online businesses have to rely on excellent customer service to be competitive (Lennon & Harris, 2002). When a competitor is only a click away, an online business is faced with increasing pressure to distinguish themselves with better customer service. Customer service in the online shopping scope has been conceptualized in different ways in the literature. Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003) developed scales of customer service, fulfillment/reliability, and security/privacy, separately. They grouped fulfillment and reliability together as one single concept, which was defined as (1) “the accurate display and description of a product so that what customers receive is what they thought they ordered” and (2) “delivery of the right product within the time frame promised.” Security and privacy were defined as “security of credit card payments and privacy of shared information.”

Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Malhotra (2002) examined privacy and security separately as two different concepts. They found the determinants of privacy were (1) sharing (selling, renting) personal information to other companies; (2) tracking of shopping habits, purchases, etc., (3) placement of cookies on a consumer’s computer, (4) being contacted by the company without providing consent; and (5) general privacy concerns. Conversely, security refers to protecting users from the risk of fraud or financial loss from their use of credit cards during the transaction. The security determinant includes (1) explaining security information clearly, (2) guaranteeing credit card security, disclosure by the firm regarding the intended use of personal details and (3) personal details being treated as private and confidential (Zeithaml, et al., 2002).
Fulfillment and reliability are related to customer service. Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003) defined them as (1) “the accurate display and description of a product so that what customers receive is what they thought they ordered” and (2) “delivery of the right product within the time frame promised.” However, Dabholkar (1996) examined reliability separately from fulfillment and he proposed the term “expected reliability”, which was defined as how accurately customers’ orders will be filled when they used the Web. Another dimension of customer service is delivery of products (Francis & White, 2002), which focus on online retailer’s delivery system including delivering the correct products and receiving an order in good condition.

The Convenience Dimension

In online shopping literature, convenience often refers to the opportunity to shop on a flexible 24/7 schedule from home (Hofacker, 2001). This dimension has drawn a lot of consumers to online shopping format. Convenience includes the opportunity to search and compare a large number of alternatives at a relatively low search cost (Alba et al., 1997) and eliminates frustrating encounters such as traffic, lack of parking, avoidance of check out lines and travel to and from various stores (Childers, Carr, Peck, & Carson, 2001). Convenience is one of the most frequently identified antecedents of consumer adoption of online shopping. Kaufman-Scarborough and Lindquist (2002) suggested that frequent online shoppers consider online shopping to be convenient by providing place-convenience since they can shop without leaving their location and allow them to take advantage of time-convenience.

Childers et al. (2001) found convenience was a significant predictor of usefulness, ease of use, and enjoyment of online shopping. Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree, and Bitner (2000) reported online shopping services were most satisfactory in cases where they saved time, worked reliably, were easy to use, addressed a salient need, and offered greater control and 24/7 access. A perception of greater convenience will lead to perceptions of greater ease of use and utility. Lack of convenience is a source of frustration with brick and mortar stores (Kaufman-Scarborough & Lindquist, 2002).

Convenience as a construct is linked to ease of use to describe the utility of the Web as a shopping medium. Burke (2002) found that consumers were enthusiastic about the ease of shopping across multiple channels. They liked being able to use the Web to check prices, promotions, and inventory in the closest retail store. Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003) found website design (i.e., navigation, information search, order processing, and product selection) was one of main factors that determines the quality of an Internet shopping experience. Ease of navigation was found to be the most likely variable to lead to online shopping (Montoya-Weiss, Voss, & Grewal, 2003). In addition, Spake, Beatty, Brockman, and Crutchfield (2003) suggested that convenience and ease of use would help a service provider develop and maintain a relationship with a customer, and are part of a broader concept of consumer comfort.

The Experiential Uniqueness Dimension

Experiential uniqueness refers to how the Web is unique from other shopping channels. If the first three dimensions - informativeness, customer service, and convenience - can be measured and matched up between online shopping and other shopping channels, this new dimension emphasizes some features only provided by the Internet. The online shopping literature highlights the characteristics of experiential uniqueness as experiential value,
entertainment value, escapism, fun, flow, and usefulness and playfulness. Mathwick et al. (2001) suggested a customer’s perception of value is based upon interactions with direct usage or distant appreciation of goods and services. Furthermore, they argued that these interactions can offer both extrinsic and intrinsic benefits.

Entertainment value is the appreciation for the retail “spectacle” or those who shop for the sake of entertainment. Entertainment is an aesthetic response that offers immediate pleasure for its own sake regardless of the online shopping environment’s ability to facilitate the achievement of a specific shopping task (Mathwick et al., 2001). Escapism was identified by Mathwick et al. (2001) as a component of playfulness. They argued escapism allows the shopper to temporarily “get away from it all” and the behavior is an end unto itself. Mathwick et al. (2001) also suggested there is a degree of intrinsic enjoyment in engaging in playful shopping behavior.

Childers et al. (2001) used the Technology Adoption Model to assess motivations for online shopping behavior. They suggested the enjoyment construct (i.e., the extent to which the activity of using the technology is perceived to provide reinforcement in its own right apart from any performance consequences) is a hedonic motivation for online shopping. A related component of intrinsic enjoyment is “fun.” Dabholkar (1996) reported that the potential for enjoyment increases the use of a technology. In the case of online shopping, if someone enjoys the shopping experience, they will utilize the Internet more often to shop for a wider variety of products. Therefore, fun and enjoyment aspects of the Internet need to be built into the design of a Website. Additionally, usefulness and personalization also have been identified as two components of the experiential uniqueness (Childers et al., 2001; Novak et al., 2000).

**EVALUATION OF ONLINE CHANNEL LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL CHANNEL LITERATURE**

In this section we discuss how the above discussed online channel literature and the four groupings in Table 1 relate to the established traditional channel literature. There are two purposes for this discussion. First, comparing and contrasting the online channel literature to the traditional channel literature by using these four dimensions can provide a clear understanding of the relationship between these two steams of literature. Consequently, the possible directions for the future research on online shopping can be discussed. Secondly, this discussion is presented to suggest face validity for the development of the four dimensions laid out in the previous section. In particular, we proceed by reviewing the traditional channel literature and assessing how the four dimensions of online channels relate to the theories developed in the traditional channel literature.

**Informativeness**

According to the traditional channel literature, information comprehensiveness is the extent to which information is available. Information relevancy and accuracy determine the usefulness of the available information. It may be hypothesized that consumers are likely to prefer a shopping media that would closely furnish them with the full extent of expected information based on the past experience (cf. Moorthy, Ratchford, & Talukdar, 1997). Therefore, information comprehensiveness, information relevancy, and information accuracy are all factors that may impact prior beliefs and consequently impacting channel preferences. Alba and Hutchinson (1987) proposed that familiarity and expertise are the dimensions of consumer
knowledge. Familiarity is defined as “the number of product-related experiences that have been accumulated by the consumer,” and expertise as “the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully.” Given that consumers at varying levels of knowledge are interacting with the medium, the perceived comprehensiveness of information offered by the online medium may show marked variation across consumers. In other words, consumer expertise and knowledge may determine the relevancy and accuracy of information available in a channel.

Interactivity is a critical factor in the effectiveness of marketing communications (Stewart & Pavlou, 2002). Interactivity is defined as having the following exchanging characteristics: it is (a) multiway (it involves two or more actors), (b) immediate (responses occur within seconds), and (c) contingent (response of one actor follows directly and logically from the action of another) (Alba et al., 1997). Interactivity involves transfer and exchange of information and therefore is the chief currency underlying the characteristic features of interactivity.

Comparing the traditional channel literature to the online literature, we can see that the basic concepts, such as information comprehensiveness, information relevancy, information accuracy, and information interactivity, which were discussed in the previous section of online shopping, have been covered and applied in the traditional literature too. However, the differences between these two streams of literature are still noticeable. First, when information comprehensiveness is still a challenge for other shopping formats, Internet often overwhelms shoppers with too much information. Second, in the traditional literature, information relevancy and information accuracy are often associated with familiarity, past experience, and prior beliefs, whereas due to the vast amount of information available over the Web, efficient mechanisms for identifying, screening, organizing, and retrieving information, such as online screening, play a more critical role for the information relevancy and information accuracy in the online literature.

Customer Service

One key factor that influences purchase choice is customer service (Blodgett, Wakefield, & Barnes, 1995). In the context of traditional channels, customer service is defined as “a process for business to provide significant value-added benefits to customers in a cost effective way” (La Londe, Cooper, & Noordewier, 1988). There are two components included in customer service: (1) those related to physical distribution service; and (2) those related to other functional units in the organization (Mentzer, Gomes, & Krapfel, 1989).

Customer service is critical for the survival and expansion of a business because it contributes to the satisfaction of the customers; contributes to the attitudes toward the firm held by the customers; and contributes to the purchase and repurchase intentions of the customers (Innis & La Londe, 1994). Ultimately, customer service is the key to customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and market share (Innis et al., 1994). There are two aspects of customer service. The first one is associated with attributes like the level of responsiveness, reliability, accuracy, and friendliness (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1988). The other one is related to how the business responds to customer complaints (Goodwin & Ross, 1990).

When the relationship between the traditional channel literature and online literature is examined, we can see that when the traditional side provides a more foundational and broader scope, the online side focuses more on the specific factors which have impacts on the customer service performance, such as fulfillment, reliability, privacy, and security. Obviously, these specific factors have been the main concerns of online shoppers and the main sources of
customer complaints. As a result, they caught more attention from academic researchers and business practitioners. However, whether the broader foundation provided by the traditional channel literature can bring more aspects to the online channel research still needs more studies.

Convenience

The concept of convenience has been discussed in the business literature since the early 1920’s (Copeland, 1923). Originally, convenience referred to a category of goods which required minimal time and physical and mental effort to purchase (Berry, Seiders, & Grewal, 2002). As time went on, this category came to denote the time and effort consumers used in purchasing the product rather than as a characteristic of the product itself (Brown, 1990). Terms that were used in conjunction with this concept were considered to be the resources given up, such as time, energy, or opportunity, in order to acquire the product. This led to the view that convenience was the non-monetary price of a product (cf. Kotler & Zaltman, 1971).

Berry et al. (2002) identified time and effort as the predominant streams of research on convenience. Effort is also considered a non-monetary cost. It is viewed as a relevant and positive input to an exchange (Berry, et al., 2002) and is related to time, intellectual thought and emotion (Youngdahl & Kellog, 1997). Anderson and Thomas (1971) examined convenience-oriented consumption while Yale and Venkatesh (1986) identified convenience preference as a consumption strategy. Morganosky (1986) created a definition of the convenience-oriented consumer. Convenience has also been categorized into different types. Seiders et al. (2000) discussed access-convenience and search-convenience. There are also possession-convenience, transaction-convenience and time-convenience (Kaufman-Scarborough & Lindquist, 2002).

In addition, the service-convenience literature has focused on the opportunity costs that prevent consumers from participating in other activities (Bivens & Volker, 1986) to the psychological costs of time spent waiting (Osuna, 1985). Brown (1990) suggested that convenience should be seen as a multidimensional construct: time, place, acquisition, use, and execution. The first four are suggested by economic utility theory and the last one relating to the amount of mental or physical effort the consumer wishes to expend in obtaining a product or service. Berry, et al. (2002) stated that the consumer’s perceived expenditure of time and effort influences their perceptions of service convenience.

Comparing the traditional literature to the online literature, we can see that they share a very common foundation. More specifically, time-convenience, place-convenience, access-convenience, search-convenience, and service-convenience, which were first developed in the traditional literature, have been studied and examined in the online literature too. This is because, fundamentally, both streams of literature support the idea that convenience is a concept involved in the non-monetary cost during the whole purchase process.

Product Uniqueness and Experiential Uniqueness

It is established in the traditional channel literature that the need for personal uniqueness plays an important role in consumer behavior. Snyder and Fromkin (1980) suggested uniqueness is a major reason why consumers seek out specific products and services. The motivation for consumers to separate themselves from others varies across individuals and situations (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977, 1980). The intensity of the motivation to be unique depends on one’s internal need to be unique (Synder & Fromkin, 1980), status aspiration (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989), and
degree of materialism (Belk, 1985). Consumers that need to be unique find it unpleasant to be too similar to others (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Consumers may manifest their need for uniqueness by selecting products different from mainstream products (Brock, 1968; Snyder, 1992; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Status aspiration is the desire for an individual to secure a high level of importance and take leadership in a social hierarchy (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989). Another way uniqueness is manifested is through the degree of materialism of the individual. Materialistic consumers are more apt to try to attain a degree of uniqueness and social status by acquiring and possessing unique products (Belk, 1985; Richins & Dawson, 1992).

Research has demonstrated a relationship between uniqueness and purchasing behavior. The purchase of scare products is a way that consumers can attain a certain level of status or degree of materialism (Brock, 1968, Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Another way consumers may become unique is by purchasing new innovative products that others cannot afford or are difficult to acquire (Burns & Krampf, 1992). Customized products by their nature are different from standard products and consumers that acquire them may achieve a higher level of status within a group (Harris & Lynn, 1996). Consumers may choose a particular shopping venue because of the unique mix of specialty stores that carry a unique product assortment that allow the consumer to accomplish materialistic or status aspiration objectives (Burns & Warren, 1995).

It seems that the uniqueness studied in the traditional channel literature is different from the uniqueness of online shopping we discussed in the previous section. The uniqueness in the current online channel literature emphasizes more on the experiential uniqueness whereas the product uniqueness is the focus of the traditional literature. However, in a larger scope, product uniqueness is part of experiential uniqueness in that searching for the unique products, buying the unique products, and consuming the unique products are part of the whole experience. Because many of the various features offered by online shopping format become the motives of online shoppers, experiential uniqueness seems to be a more appropriate construct for online shopping studies than product uniqueness.

In summary, the four dimensions we identified in the online shopping literature, informativeness, customer service, convenience, and experiential uniqueness, have been studied and examined in the traditional channel literature from different angles. As one of the newest shopping formats, online shopping came into being sharing similarities with traditional shopping formats. Therefore, searching for brand-name frameworks and models to study online shopping seems inappropriate. However, the similar dimensions and structures between online shopping and other traditional shopping channels should not disguise the uniqueness of this new shopping format.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper reviewed the literature related to online shopping in an effort to arrive at a state-of-the-art understanding of what is known about the dimensions that determine consumer choice of the online channel. After reviewing the literature, we found that the variables and factors studied previously could be categorized into four dimensions: Informativeness Dimension, Customer Service Dimension, Convenience Dimension, and Experiential Uniqueness Dimension. After we reviewed the relevant traditional channel literature, we found similarities and differences between the online shopping literature and traditional channel literature regarding those four dimensions.
The dimensions of online shopping as derived by the extensive incidence and interest in literature and corroborated by expert judgments implying their face validity is neither a complete assessment of everything we ought to know nor a measure of what we ever will know. Our focus was to delineate connections between the emergent online channel literature and the established traditional channel literature. Reassuringly so far, developments in online shopping behavior research have charted well trodden paths of the established traditional channel literature. But such a reassurance should not be at the cost of the more plausible reality that online shopping behavior could differ in substance and style from its traditional counterpart. From the discussions here, we at least have an idea what these two streams of literature have in common. Furthermore, it is our modest hope that this discussion will stimulate efforts directed with curiosity and vigor to unearth points of departure between online shopping behavior and traditional shopping behavior.

The need and necessity of such an effort is easy to see. We are yet to see a comprehensive model of online shopping behavior developed in the literature; or more modestly, to affirm conclusively one way or other that a comprehensive model is either an unnecessary theoretical flourish or a fundamentally important concept to our understanding. With existing ambivalence in such aspects, a question as basic as whether a consumer will choose to buy online rather than through another shopping medium is painfully moot. On a more pragmatic note, because online shopping is still in its infancy, there is that ever present need to understand the characteristics of online shopping that a marketer may use to encourage a consumer to choose an online medium. When shopping behavior is little understood or key variables impacting behavior is clouded in confusion, opportunities for manipulative efforts by marketers abound. Online privacy and security issues raging in the popular press discussions attest to such concerns. As we elaborate and debate on these pressing issues, the judicious measure by which online shopping behavior is outlined in this paper should contribute to the growing impetus for more substantive elaboration of theory and empirical work in future research.

REFERENCES


