Factors influencing the choice to shop online: A psychological study in a South African context

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ABSTRACT

As the Internet and opportunities for online shopping are growing at a very fast pace worldwide, investigating this phenomenon within a South African context is crucial considering that it is a relatively new trend in the country. Typical of new trends and phenomena is the absence of research and the resultant lack of existing literature about the topic. Few studies have examined the factors and reasons that entice South Africans to utilise this modern shopping channel, and even fewer have used an in-depth, qualitative approach. To assist in filling this void, this study examines people's reasons for taking up or not taking up online shopping, from a South African perspective. A snowball sampling method was used to identify participants fitting the predetermined sample criteria and in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with all participants. Findings are presented by means of themes identified during the data analysis. These indicated that saving time, the convenience of products being increasingly available and accessible, and being able to make price comparisons easily were the main advantages of online shopping. The main disadvantages were not being able to touch and feel products, and the absence of a salesperson.

Keywords: advantages of online shopping; aspects influencing online shopping; online shopping; qualitative research design; reasons for shopping online

Online shopping is a growing phenomenon around the world, especially in countries where a well-developed infrastructure exists for Internet marketing activities (Kau, Tang, & Ghose, 2003). Hawkins, Best, and Coney (2001) stated that although

Internet shopping has presented a small portion of retail sales in South Africa, it is expected to increase drastically in the future.

Although authors and research companies have predicted growing sales through the Internet in the future, the question lingers: 'Why do many consumers still prefer other shopping outlets to the Internet?'. The BMI TechKnowledge Group (2000) conducted a study that found the reasons for South African Internet users not shopping, or intending to shop, online to be: security concerns; being comfortable with current shopping and banking methods; and privacy concerns. The results of a study conducted by Webcheck (1999) regarding factors that influence South African consumers to purchase online, indicated (in order of importance): issues of security; reliability; convenience; the ease of finding the product; online speed of Internet access; price of the item; ability to make more informed purchases; and no pressure from a salesperson.

These results illustrated that South African patrons are for the most part concerned about Internet security and reliability with regard to online shopping. Interestingly, the importance of the price of products is near the end of the list of factors influencing patrons to shop online. Traditionally, the price of an item plays a more substantial role should those items be purchased in brick-and-mortar stores.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN INTERNET USER MARKET: AN OVERVIEW

In the 21st century consumers have more brands and products to choose from and purchase than ever before. These products are sold from various outlets, including the traditional brick-and-mortar stores, in-home shopping sources such as direct mail and catalogues, and online buying via the Internet (North, Mostert, & Du Plessis, 2003). One major advantage of the Internet for online shoppers is the relatively easy access to an abundance of free information. The search for information is reduced to a few effortless keystrokes, whereas gathering the same information by traditional means would require considerably more time and energy. Other advantages of the Internet include the availability of a wealth of information from various sources on product features, quality of products, and reliability of different suppliers. Also, the prices of products are available from various outlets and can be compared in real time at various online price comparison sites. One of the biggest disadvantages of online shopping is that the prospective consumer has no chance to feel and touch the product before purchasing it (North et al., 2003).

According to research conducted by North et al. (2003), the reasons why people do not shop online are as listed in Table 1 below and are categorised by gender.

Table 1: Reasons for not shopping on the Internet

Reasons for not shopping	Percentage of total participants who cited each reason	
	Male	Female
Security concerns	70	73
Lack of 'touch'	45	54
Unfamiliar merchants	41	37
Too difficult	21	26

According to Barnard and Wesson (2003), customers may be prepared to visit and browse an Internet site, even utilising it for information gathering purposes, but do not have adequate trust in the site actually to complete an online purchase. Trust involves more than a secure connection or the promise of a secure transaction. It includes issues such as customer support and perceived trust – can the site deliver what it promises, when it promises, and will there be after sales service and support, if needed? Barnard and Wesson (2003) claimed that trust is thus one of the foremost critical success factors of survival for virtual organisations on the Internet.

North et al.'s (2003) study also specified the product and service categories from which the majority of participants had purchased before. They included: books and magazines (64% of participants); music CDs (41% of participants); computer software (39% of participants); movie or event tickets (35% of participants); airline tickets (27% of participants); and hotel reservations (25% of participants). In the same study, the product and service categories *least* purchased from included: interior decorating/renovations (1.47% of participants); and property (1.29% of participants[1]).

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was to explore ways in which people converse about and make meaning of online shopping and how this entices them to shop online in a South African context. The investigation of people's motives for preferring to shop online, as well as their reasons for doing so, are reported in this article. The majority of South African studies that have investigated factors influencing the choice of online shopping have applied quantitative methods during the research process. In light of the fact that very little literature on the subject matter using a qualitative perspective is available within the South African context, this study has contributed meaningfully to this area of research.

Research problem and objectives

The research objectives were concerned with determining contributing factors that motivate people to take up online shopping or to continue using this modern shopping channel. The research question was: 'What are the factors that motivate people to shop online or not to use this shopping channel'. Research conducted to date has been mostly quantitative and few in-depth studies have provided insight into people's preferences for using the Internet as a shopping channel. Moreover, in this field of study very few South African studies have been done to date. Therefore, an in-depth study was conducted, identifying themes from participants' responses during interviews. Elements of the phenomenon that were investigated included: aspects most and least enjoyed while using online shopping facilities; regularity of online shopping; products purchased most and least online; reasons and motivations for not shopping online; information security; personal concerns regarding online shopping; Internet hackings; what the Internet is mainly used for; factors influencing online shopping; and website recommendations.

Because the Internet is a fast-changing environment, and consumers' attitudes and behaviour will likewise change, it is with caution that factors influencing the preference to shop online are identified among online shoppers. Thus, differences in terms of online shopping sites, and consumers' stances and behaviour towards this phenomenon, need to be updated continuously.

Despite these limitations, this study has provided valuable information for any company or institution that currently offers online shopping or that might make use of this facility in the future. The study tapped into people's reasons for shopping online and the motivations behind their actions. Therefore, the study has contributed towards the consumer psychology paradigm in general, and more specifically towards knowledge concerning factors influencing patrons' preference to shop online in a South African context. According to Dittmar (1996), it is important to develop a social psychology of people as economic actors and consumers since their economic and consumer activities are interlinked with their attitudes, beliefs, and shared understanding. Further, Dittmar (1996) has stated that people negotiate their sense of identity, well-being and relationships with others in part through money and material goods. This study examined factors influencing individuals to shop online or not by identifying those factors that affect their Internet purchasing behaviour.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study followed a qualitative approach. A qualitative research orientation differs from that of quantitative research in a number of ways, including: approaches to data; reliance on non-positivist perspectives to science; greater use of logic in practice;

and a more cyclical research path. A qualitative approach to data takes into account that the researcher's main concerns will include matters such as the accessibility of other cultures or sub-cultures; the relativity to actors' accounts of their social worlds; and the relationship between sociological descriptions and actors' conceptions of their actions. The data collection methods for this study pertained to recordings of what people said, including their words; gestures and tones; observing specific behaviours; and studying written documents.

Research method(s)

Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. The questions were formulated in such a way that key concepts were addressed. The interviewer (first author) asked participants a series of pre-established questions with a limited set of response categories; however, the majority of questions were open-ended and thus provided room for variation in responses. For consistency, the interviewer had a basic script for guidance, so that the same topics were covered in each interview. The interview started with pre-planned questions and probes until no new relevant information was forthcoming. The interview time ranged between 45 and 60 minutes.

Selection of cases

A snowball-sampling technique was implemented for selecting a sample of online shoppers. According to Neuman (1997), snowball sampling is often used by researchers who are interested in an interconnected network of people or organisations. The crucial feature of this technique is the assumption that each person is connected to another through a direct or indirect linkage. In this light, snowball sampling was adequate for selecting cases for the research study, and more importantly, as a sample of online shoppers introduced the researcher to other online shoppers, the research sample grew. Thus, finding an adequate sample was simplified, and this method ensured that those cases selected were indeed online shoppers. Once current online shoppers referred other online shoppers, those individuals were contacted directly. The study was explained to them and each newly identified online shopper was asked for permission to be interviewed.

Limiting the sample size did not only rely on the number of participants that could be accessed, but also depended on when data/theoretical saturation had been reached. The latter refers to when new data no longer show new theoretical elements, but rather confirm what has already been found (Punch, 1998). The aim was to include participants from various cultural and racial groups in the sample in order to represent the demographics of the South African population, as well as an equal number of males and females and participants above 18 years of age. The

age limit was important as the majority of online shopping payments are done by means of credit cards. In terms of geographic location, people living in Gauteng were targeted.

All the participants fell within the qualifying criteria of the sample. All participants were older than 18 years of age (ages ranged from 22 to 29 years), lived in Gauteng, South Africa, at the time of data gathering, and were Internet users and online shoppers. In terms of gender, four participants were male and four female. Only one black participant was identified through snowball sampling, and the remaining participants were white. After conducting interviews with eight participants, data saturation occurred.

Obtaining the data

Once appointments had been made with participants, the interviews were conducted. Participants' permission to audiotape the conversation was requested before starting with the interviews. Techniques can be varied to meet various situations, and varying the researcher's technique is known as employing tactics. According to the traditional interviewing technique, the researcher is involved in an informal conversation with the participant; begins with more general questions and moves on to more specific ones; and should avoid getting involved in a 'real' conversation where she or he answers the questions or gives her or his opinions. This makes the interview more honest, morally sound, and reliable as it treats the participant as an equal (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The use of language and specific terms is very important for creating a 'sharedness of meanings' in which both the interviewer and the participant understand the contextual nature of the interview. In order to achieve this, the interviewer carefully explained the aim of the research study and the contextual nature of the interview. Thereafter, the interview data cannot merely be a report on external reality, but a reality constructed by both parties (Punch, 1998).

Data capturing and editing

The taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and saved electronically. Detailed field notes were also taken. All transcriptions and field notes were captured in a database in Microsoft Excel. Data were edited and cleaned by crosschecking for duplicate records and verifying selections of the transcription records with the data entered into the database.

Data analysis

The data analysis process began with the transcribed field notes as they appeared in the Excel database. The process of data reduction assisted in selecting, simplifying,

and transforming the data. This was done by means of various categories being inserted into the database according to the interview guide's chronological flow of questions asked during the interviews. In fact, the process of data reduction started prior to the actual data collection. Data reduction was a continuous process throughout the entire study and consequently occurred until the final report was produced. From the transcribed field notes in the Excel database, themes were identified, followed by patterns being summarised and ultimately telling a story regarding the key motivating factors influencing people to take up or not take up online shopping. Therefore, the data reduction process enabled the researchers to sort and organise the data in such a manner that fixed conclusions could be reached and verified with current literature on the subject matter.

Coding is specified as part of the analysis process, where codes are identified as tags or labels used to assign meanings to the information gathered during the data collection process, in this case, face-to-face interviews (Kelly, 2006). From these codes themes were generated that captured the common meanings attached by participants to their online shopping experiences. The aim was to identify regularities and patterns emerging from the data (Kelly, 2006).

FINDINGS

Eight themes generated from the data are presented and discussed in the context of the relevant literature. Direct quotations from the interviews are also provided.

Theme 1: Aspects influencing online shopping

The high South African crime rate does not seem to influence participants to shop online more, as stated by one participant: 'The high SA crime rate influences me negatively in general, but does not affect my attitude towards online shopping. It is not really applicable as crime is the same everywhere'. If it did influence participants' behaviour, it did so to a minimal extent. Thus, there seems to be no perceived connection between online shopping and safety in terms of crime, as the online shopping facility is not necessarily perceived as a safer purchasing alternative compared to traditional shopping. This conclusion coincides with North et al.'s (2003) findings in terms of which the relative safety of purchasing from home was indicated as one of the least important considerations for online shoppers. However, Singh (2004) provided reasons why South African Internet banking services would be ideal, one of which was that there is no chance of being caught in the crossfire during a bank robbery.

Familiarity with the Internet aided in participants' confidence to buy online, even positively influencing some participants towards shopping online, as indicated

by one participant: 'It influences me in a positive way regarding online shopping. The more familiar you get with the Internet the more you tend to shop online. It definitely influences you'. Trust in the Internet as a shopping channel highlighted interesting factors, among which advanced technology; no fraudulent activities to date; and frequent online shopping all contributed to the Internet being constructed as a trustworthy shopping channel. One participant argued:

> I trust almost everything on the Internet, but I always look to see if a site is secure or not. For example I look for the Pop-up Cop with an icon in the corner indicating that it is a trusted secure site. We update Norton Antivirus weekly on our computer and we have very good firewalls. It influences me in a positive manner and I feel safe to do online shopping.

In terms of risk-taking in online shopping, participants believed this aspect to have a negative influence on online shopping, yet attitudes towards online shopping were seen not to be negatively influenced. The credibility of online shopping at the time of data gathering influenced participants in a positive manner. The credibility of the seller was also listed by North et al. (2003) as one of the most important factors considered by South African online shoppers. Drawing from the results, the credibility of online shopping in general proved to be site dependent, and participants stated that sites had to have been in business for some time in order to be credible. This statement was further supported by the reputation of online retailers which are well known locally, and where trust can be based on the service already received offline, for example, Computicket. One participant argued that credibility could be established through certification programmes, along with site recommendations. Furthermore, online shopping was perceived to be credible due to limited previous victimisation, as stated by one participant: 'I definitely trust the Internet as there is a guarantee and up until now no fraud has occurred. It also encourages me to do more online shopping'.

Theme 2: Enjoyable aspects of online shopping

Participants reported that they enjoyed online shopping because it saves time and makes the shopping experience more convenient with products being increasingly available and accessible. As one participant argued:

> The convenience. It is easier to browse or search an online catalogue than to look generally for the same product or item in a traditional store manually. It saves time and patience. It is a good feeling to be able to shop online and not to be left behind in the era of IT excellence.

Webcheck's (2000) study listed the convenience of the online buying method as one of the biggest advantages of online shopping in a South African context. This finding was supported by Chiang and Dholakia's (2003) as well as Richards' (2005) studies in other parts of the world. Being able to make price comparisons is also an advantage of online shopping. This concurs with the results of North et al.'s (2003) study.

Theme 3: The limitations of online shopping

Four major disadvantages of online shopping were identified. The first relates to deceptive and incomplete product information; the inability to touch and feel the products; and the absence of a salesperson. One participant argued: 'Not being able to see the product before buying it (pictures can sometimes be misleading), a too huge variety can also make it difficult to decide what you want'. A clear social component emerged, which indicated that human beings prefer social interaction with other human beings and the lack of social interaction is a limitation of online shopping. This lack of social interaction is experienced as there are no personal assistants and no communication with a sales assistant or an online seller while doing online shopping. These descriptions of online shopping sustain certain patterns of social action. Therefore, meanings regarding the absence of the touch and feel aspect of online shopping and of a sales consultant, might prompt individuals not to shop online. Yet, the results obtained by Wolfinbarger's (2001) study indicated that the absence of retail workers is appreciated when salespeople are perceived as being unhelpful, uninformed, and pressuring or obligating buyers. Technological incompatibilities such as a slow and unreliable Internet connection were also mentioned as a disadvantage: 'First of all, my ISP (Internet Service Provider) is unreliable, the server gets disconnected a few times during a task and then for most online, secure sites, I will need to go back and start from scratch again'.

Theme 4: The regularity of online shopping

The regularity of online shopping is determined by individual and consumption needs; the unavailability of a credit card; and the availability of products at local brick-and-mortar stores. Kerner (2004) illustrated that the majority of American consumers do product research online yet purchase offline. This phenomenon is termed 'cross-channel shopping'. In terms of aspects influencing South Africans to do online shopping or not, cross-channel shopping by seeking information and comparing prices were indicated as the main advantages of online shopping. Some participants indicated their preference to rather purchase a product at a local brick-and-mortar store, depending on the availability of the product, as indicated by one

participant: 'It is more convenient when you need groceries to go down to your local store'. Kau et al. (2003) termed this phenomenon the 'on-off shopper'.

Theme 5: Products purchased most online

The results from the interviews indicated that products purchased most online included tickets, CDs, appliances, and computer equipment, as well as educational products such as textbooks. North et al.'s (2003) study listed books, music CDs, computer software, movie or event tickets, and airline tickets as products most purchased. Card, Chen, and Cole (2003) in studying online travel products, reported that online air tickets were purchased more than other travel products. Reasons given by the participants for mainly purchasing these products online pertained to availability, and ease of booking and buying, as indicated by one participant: 'Usually I book and buy ticket shows and Computicket tickets once a month. I love ballet and usually book shows for that or then movie tickets online. It is much more convenient that standing in a queue somewhere'.

Theme 6: Products purchased less online

In contrast with the above, more expensive products were purchased less online, along with items where the touch and feel aspect ranked high, for example clothes and gifts. Clothes, furniture, and more expensive items such as cars and property were rarely bought online. In the study by North et al. (2003), property was indicated as the item least purchased via the Internet shopping channel. The fear of loss is evident, be it a financial loss or a product loss. Fear of financial loss is closely linked to purchasing expensive items prior to inspection of such products, ultimately creating the feeling of money being wasted should the customer be disappointed in the product or the product not live up to the consumer's expectations. Product loss emerges when the consumer purchases an expensive product such as clothes or furniture yet never receives the product. The risk of shipping problems and product failure was also noted by Garbarino and Strahilevitz (2004). According to one participant:

> It is the more expensive items that I buy least online and you want those expensive items immediately so it is better to go to the shops and just get it. You do not want to wait for it to get delivered.

Yet another participant argued that: 'The South African online retailers do not have audio streaming which enables you to listen to the music before you buy it'.

Theme 7: Information security

Information security refers to the securing of any personal information that online shoppers make available on the Internet during online shopping. Information security

is mainly associated with the protection of personal and confidential information such as personal and banking details. Participants are in general not concerned about their personal particulars being available on the Internet. This sense of security is strengthened by the existence of advanced technology as participants talked about security certificates and data encryption levels increasing their trust of reputable websites. In this regard one participant argued: 'Generally, they will have certain security software, of which the lock logo must be displayed on the site. They also ask for the last three digits of the credit card, which most fraudsters do not have'.

Internet hacking is an activity during which personal information is stolen. Possibly because none of the participants had been targeted by hackers at the time of data gathering, they did not express much concern about hacking. One participant said:

> I know about it, but luckily it has never happened to me before, and therefore does not affect my choice to do online shopping. Once I am a victim of hackings or things like that then I will reconsider doing online shopping.

Another participant mentioned that it was the consumer's responsibility to try to avoid this negative aspect of online shopping:

> We have a lot of safety programs and firewalls. I know that we are well protected against such things. I understand how it is done and I know that the chances of being affected by being a victim are very low. The chances of being robbed are usually because of the customer not protecting his or her computer (by means of anti-virus software etcetera) against possible hack or intrusion attacks.

Theme 8: Site recommendation

Safety and quality were listed as the main aspects contributing to sites being recommended, as indicated by one participant: 'Yes, because the more you find quality sites through connections and friends, the better the shopping experience'. Participants reported the benefits of price comparisons; savings in terms of monetary value; reliability; and user friendliness as their main reasons for recommending web sites to others. This links with the advantages of online shopping pertaining mainly to the time saving factor; convenience; availability; accessibility; and the ability to do price comparisons.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Size and nature of the sample

The sample was limited to eight South African citizens living in Gauteng at the time of data gathering. Also, only one black participant was included in the study. This study therefore had certain shortcomings such as that its findings cannot be applied to all South Africans. The study's aim was, however, to explore meanings that people attach to online shopping using in-depth interviews, and not to generalise findings to the population of South Africans who shop online.

Limitation of scope

The research and its findings are specific to online shoppers, therefore, only contributing to this specific domain, excluding the views and opinions of people who do not shop online. Online shopping is a relatively new trend in South Africa, and understanding why people would shop online would be important for online retailers as the focus of consumer psychology is on understanding and explaining the psychological factors which influence consumers' choices, purchases, and usage behaviours (Bettman, 1986).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Research to broaden the online shopping consumer base

Additional research, specifically focussing on peoples' reasons for engaging in online shopping or not, within a South African context, needs to be conducted, utilising a larger and more representative sample. New consumer behaviour models, theories, and approaches could be identified from additional research, ultimately aiding online retailers to broaden their consumer base. Furthermore, this research could establish how online shopping should be marketed effectively to consumers in order to increase emerging groups of Internet users, and ultimately, active online shoppers.

Research concerning motives affecting online shopping

Research into the roles of emotion and interpersonal relationships that may affect the online shopping activity is needed as online shopping is not necessarily and completely governed by rational human motives.

Methodological imperative

As indicated previously, most research conducted to date on the subject has been quantitative and driven by preconceptions. Thus, there is a need for future research to be conducted from a qualitative vantage point, free of assumptions and producing in-depth results. This would broaden the scope of research on the subject, thus contributing to the general body of knowledge and to the consumer psychology paradigm in general. The latter would in turn contribute in terms of new models and approaches being identified to assist online retailers in their quest to attract more consumers.

Diversifying sample characteristics

As the sample in this study does not represent the diversity of the South African population, further studies should explore the meanings that a range of South Africans attach to online shopping. Emerging groups of Internet users in South Africa should be included in future research studies.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study are valuable for various reasons. First, a set of South African results has been produced which can be compared to similar research studies conducted abroad. Secondly, a contribution has been made to the body of knowledge of the consumer psychology paradigm as meanings which influence South Africans to take up online shopping or their reasons for not doing so have been identified. Thirdly, this study has provided information of interest to any company or retailer focussing on South African online shoppers as part of their customer base; understanding the motivations that influence consumers in terms of online shopping could prove worthwhile. The results can provide direction in terms of planning and implementing features that will increase online shopping and customers' loyalty, both online and offline.
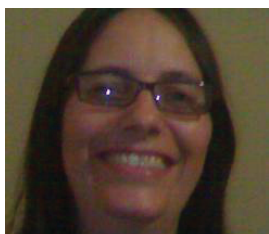
NOTES

1. The percentages shown add up to more than 100 as multiple responses were allowed.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Maray de Swardt holds an MA Research Psychology degree from the University of Pretoria. Her research interests include investigating the social phenomenon of Internet shopping.

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