Identifying the Ideal Types of Online Shoppers: A Qualitative Analysis of Online Shopping

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ABSTRACT

The tremendous increase in online shopping has created a growing demand to understand online shopping behavior. This study contributes to this understanding by identifying ideal types among online shoppers. An ideal type is an analytical construct used to ascertain similarities and deviations to concrete cases in an individual phenomenon. Theoretically, the study draws from different perspectives to create a multifaceted view of online shoppers. The purpose is not to categorize online shoppers under a specific category but rather to help understand different typically occurring online shopping behaviors. Through thematic analysis of the data from 31 participants, this study presents five ideal types of online shoppers: conservative shoppers, rational shoppers, hedonistic shoppers, spontaneous shoppers, and vanguard shoppers. The formed ideal types serve as the main theoretical contribution of this study. From a practical standpoint, implications for online shop providers on how to accommodate the needs of each ideal type are provided.

KEYWORDS
Consumer Behavior, Electronic Commerce, Online Shopping Behavior, Online Shopping, Qualitative Study, Thematic Analysis, Weberian Ideal Types

INTRODUCTION

Understanding consumer behavior plays a crucial role in all kinds of business fields. Since shopping and purchasing have shifted from physical “brick-and-mortar” stores to online environments in recent years, it is important to further understand the motives, habits, and expectations of online shoppers. Despite some similarities between online shopping and traditional offline shopping in physical environments, the motives for online shopping can be fundamentally different (Ganesh, 2010).
The purpose of this study is to increase the understanding of online shopping behavior by analyzing consumer narratives describing their online shopping experiences and purchase paths from initial need recognition to post-purchase activities. The study brings together relevant consumer behavior literature from marketing and information systems (IS) studies to examine the antecedents of online shopping and their effects on consumers’ online shopping preferences. Based on the theoretical antecedents of online shopping, ideal types (Weber, 1904a, 1904b) of online shoppers are identified.

An ideal type is an analytical construct originally presented by sociologist Max Weber. It can be defined as an entity created by a researcher, with which s/he aims to first understand and then describe a multifaceted social action or phenomenon. Ideal types are internally fully coherent constructions representing reality but not found in reality as they are presented. As such, they are abstractions of reality (Giddens & Sutton, 2009; Weber, 1904a, 1904b). Ideal types either fit or deviate from a given situation of the reality and thus cannot be understood as being empirically right or wrong. According to Weber, ideal types have a twofold function: serving as a measurement tool for reality and to contrast the created ideal types with the empirically observed phenomenon. This enables identifying the regularities and causalities within the observed phenomenon or the observed social system. According to Kaesler (2003), these regularities and causalities can be further utilized in understanding and explaining the social system with a higher level of abstraction.

The purpose of forming ideal types is to reduce the complexity of the social reality by making it easier to understand in an analytical way and to differentiate and highlight the most essential aspects of a social phenomenon (Weber, 1988). Contemplating and applying Weberian ideal types has enabled the use of fictional people in the design process and had a strong impact on designing technologies and products. From a research perspective, the concept of ideal type has been previously used, for example, in relation to consumers of sport and wellness products (Kettunen et al., 2017) and services and tourism (cf., Ahtiainen, Piirainen, & Vehmas, 2015). Although the ideal type approach can be considered as a suitable method for investigating and describing online shopping behavior as well, it has been unused in the context of online shopping.

**Previous Research and the Contribution of This Study**

Although online shopper typologies and categorization methods have been discussed particularly in marketing research (e.g., Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004a; Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004b; Brown et al., 2003; Kau et al., 2003; Rohm & Swaminathan, 2004; Barnes et al., 2007; Ganesh et al., 2010), in IS research, online shopping behavior has more generally been studied by focusing on the acceptance and use of technology (cf., Tandon et al., 2016; An et al., 2016; Yapraklı et al., 2013). A common approach for consumer segmentation in marketing is to form consumer clusters, which are usually based on the quantitative characteristics of consumers, such as their demographic or psychographic facts.

Instead of forming consumer clusters – which has been done, for example, by Brown et al. (2003), Kau et al. (2003), Rohm and Swaminathan (2004), Barnes et al. (2007), as well as Ganesh et al. (2010) – our qualitative approach and the use of the Weberian ideal types concept allows us to give a different insight to consumers’ online shopping behavior, as described by consumers themselves, and thus provide a complementary typology to the ones generated by quantitative data, categorization and clustering methods. In contrast to the consumer clusters formed by clustering algorithms (e.g., Brown et al., 2003; Kau et al., 2003; Rohm & Swaminathan, 2004; Barnes et al., 2007; Ganesh et al., 2010) or consumer categories, Weberian ideal types are a logical and thus not necessary an empirical representation of consumer typologies, and they do not aim for a perfect and exclusive representation of the consumer groups. Ideal type method does not try to categorize people into one category based on their behavior. Instead, ideal type approach aims to combine sets of causal behaviors under one ideal type, leaving the possibility for people to identify themselves among more than one ideal type. In other words, a person can share qualities from several ideal types.

In this study, ideal types provide insights on consumer logic on the online shopping context; how consumers make sense of online services and involve different online providers into their lives by
E-Services: Characteristics, Scope and Conceptual Strengths
www.igi-global.com/article/services-characteristics-scope-conceptual-strengths/3939?camid=4v1a

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