A Critical Review of Online Consumer Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The topic of online consumer behavior has been examined under various contexts over the years. Although researchers from a variety of business disciplines have made significant progress over the past few years, the scope of these studies is rather broad, the studies appear relatively fragmented and no unifying theoretical model is found in this research area. In view of this, we provide an exhaustive review of the literature and propose an integrative model of online consumer behavior so as to analyze the online consumer behavior in a systematic way. This proposed framework not only provides us with a cohesive view of online consumer behavior, but also serves as a salient guideline for researchers in this area. We conclude our paper with a research agenda for the study of online consumer behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Online consumer behavior has become an emerging research area with an increasing number of publications per year. The research articles appear in a variety of journals and conference proceedings in the fields of information systems, marketing, management, and psychology. A review of these articles indicates that researchers mostly draw theories from classical consumer behavior research, such as behavioral learning (Skinner, 1938), personality research (Folkes, 1988), information processing (Bettman, 1979), and attitude models (Fishbein, 1975).
A close examination of the literature in this area reveals that most of the components of consumer behavior theory have been applied to the study of online consumer behavior. However, the application is not as straightforward as simply borrowing the components and applying them. There are still significant differences between offline and online consumer behavior that warrant a distinguishing conceptualization. For example, Vijayasarathy (2001) integrated the web specific factors (online shopping aid) into the theory of reasoned action (TRA) to better explain consumer online shopping behavior. Song and Zahedi (2001) built on the model of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and examined the effects of website design on the adoption of Internet shopping.

A review of online consumer research reveals that the scope of published studies is rather broad, the studies appear relatively fragmented with contradictory results, and only very few prior studies (e.g., Jarvenpaa and Todd, 1996; Koufaris et al., 2001) have attempted to systematically review and develop a framework for the study of this important research area. In this vein, the objectives of this study are: (1) to provide a systematic and exhaustive review of online consumer behavior research, (2) to identify important constructs that are specific to the context of online purchasing, (3) to propose an integrated framework that enhances our understanding of the underlying driving factors of online consumer behavior, and (4) to provide directions for future research in this area.

The paper is organized as follows. Section II outlines the research approach and Section III describes the results and the literature analysis. Section IV presents an integrated framework for the study of online consumer behavior. Finally, Section V addresses the discussion, and Section VI concludes the paper by considering the future research agenda in this area.

A structured research approach

Prior literature provides us with a rich foundation on which to build a research framework for the study of online consumer behavior. As suggested in Douglas et al. (1994), strong theoretical and conceptual frameworks can be developed through an integration of constructs from different research traditions and disciplines. In the current study, we review the prior literature of online consumer behavior and analyze the theories and the underpinning factors.

A systematic and structured approach in search and review is strongly recommended in writing sound IS literature reviews (Webster and Watson, 2002). In this study, we conducted an exhaustive and systematic electronic search using ProQuest, Social Science Citation Index, and IEEE Xplore. Moreover, we conducted a literature search in the EC-specific journals including International Journal of Electronic Commerce and Internet Research: Electronic Networking Applications and Policy. In addition to the search for referred journal articles, we included three IS-related conference proceedings (AMCIS, HICSS, ICIS) in our literature search and analysis.

The literature search was based on keywords such as “online shopping”, “Internet shopping” and “online consumer purchasing behavior”. Each article was reviewed and screened in order to eliminate the articles that were not pertinent to the current focus. A total of 355 articles in the area of online consumer behavior were identified from 1994 to June 2002. For any study to be included in our analysis, it has to focus primarily on consumer purchasing behavior on the Web. Electronic copies of most articles were obtained from digital libraries and online databases.