

## **UNLOCKING THE DETERMINANTS OF PURCHASE INTENTIONS IN DIGITAL ERA-A STUDY OF SEARCH AND EXPERIENCE PRODUCTS**

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### **Abstract**

The digital medium, to a great extent, has reduced the conventional differences between search and experience goods by bringing down the costs of assembling and disseminating information and contributing novel ways of knowing about products during purchase. At the same time, differences in the type of information sought for search and experience goods can instigate distinctions in the procedure through which consumers draw together information and formulate online decisions. A groundwork experiment reveals that although there are considerable differences in customer's' apparent ability to assess product quality pre-purchase amid experience and search goods in conventional retail environments, such distinctions are hazy in online environments. An examination of the online consumer behavior of a representative sample of Indian consumers shows that there are significant differences in the factors influencing their purchase behavior in these two distinctive categories. Particularly, search goods are highly brand image driven as compared to experience goods. On the other hand, social influence like presence of product reviews from peers/other users has a larger effect on consumer search and buying behavior for experience goods. Yet service and website quality plays an equally significant role for both search and experience goods.

**Keywords: service quality, online shopping, search goods, experience goods, purchase intention**

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## Introduction

Undoubtedly most of the people belonging to developed and developing countries are more occupied than before due to busy lifestyle and working conditions. Technological innovations push people to opt for new means for day to day life. With the era of digitalization, the Internet emerged as a revolutionary tool and transformed people's living styles from traditional to contemporary. Kozinets (2002) emphasize the impact of the Internet as informational base and communication media on consumption decisions. According to Casalo et al. (2007), the Internet has become one of the most important communication channels and it motivates some changes in purchasing patterns. It gives the consumers the needed information and opportunity for hassle free comparison. Moreover, marketers can get access to a wider database of customers. This changing marketing environment could be called as "new age" in marketing management (Reedy et al., 1999). E-commerce has brought remarkable benefits for vendors and consumers and changed the way of doing transactions activities (Schneider, 2007).

The most significant factor which influences consumer's choice to purchase online or not is the kind of products one is looking for. As said by Nelson (1970, 1974), Darby and Karni (1973), we classify products into 3 types, search products, experience products and credence products. But in this study, we try to cover search and experience product category which essentially means limited and extensive decision-making categories respectively. Andersen and Philipsen (1998) outline the goods characteristics in the categories:

Goods with **search characteristics** feature low pre-buying costs of quality detection. Hence, the buyer can learn by comparing and inspecting the goods' attributes before buying. Examples for such goods are clothes, footwear, furniture, cameras, and food.

Goods with **experience characteristics** feature high pre-buying costs and high post-buying costs of quality detection. The utility cannot be exactly determined even after consumption. Examples for such goods are health services, legal advices, and child day care, religious and spiritual guidance. Every type has its own characteristic, which will lead to different shopping environment requirements for the consumers. This environment can be shopping location or interpersonal environment, like shopping alone or with friends.

### **Online purchase intention**

Based on theory of reasoned action, purchase intentions determine the corresponding consumer's behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Measures of Intention are more precise than measures of behaviors in attracting potential customers as they have a tendency to skip original preferences. Online purchase intention of a customer is defined as the concept that gives the power of the customer's intention towards online purchase (Salisbury et al., 2001). Pavlou (2003) quoted online purchase intention as a better yardstick of websites usage intention of when gauging online consumer behavior. Online purchase intentions are dependent on many factors since it involves sharing of information and buying action. (Pavlou, 2003).

Knowing that consumers are playing an important role in marketing, figuring out the effect of the factors on the purchase intentions is significant. Investigating the shopping activities, the process of consumer decision making over the internet and the kind of products they buy has to be found out by e retailers to satisfy the customers and excel in the competitive commercial environment. Due to radical innovations, the conventional method of shopping has turned inadequate for people. E-commerce offers consumers better choices, increased information and numerous ways to purchase. Furthermore, e-commerce will continue to be a medium for selling products, content and services over the internet (Korper and Ellis, 2001). Hence individuals can purchase or sell whatsoever, anytime sitting anywhere through internet shopping (Ko, et al., 2004).

Chang, et al. (2005) researched on classification of variables which determine online shopping behavior. As per the study, attributes are classified into three categories. First is perceived characteristics of online sales channel which comprises risk, benefit, e shopping experience, trust and service quality. Second classification is web site characteristics and product features like risk decreasing measures, web site attributes and product features; and the third category highlighted by researchers is consumer characteristics.

This paper tries to associate these different perspectives. It is seen that though the internet serves as a significant information source for both search and experience goods, the type of information that customers seek, and hence the way they search and make decisions, is different for the two

types of categories (Ha and Hoch 1989; Hoch and Deighton 1989; Hoch and Ha 1986; Weathers, Sharma, and Wood 2007).

In sustaining the idea that the online makes all attributes “searchable,” we find that differences between search and experience goods, in terms of the perceived ability to assess product quality before purchase, are less in online shopping than in traditional retail settings

### **Review of Literature**

According to Chayapa (2011), the method of making decision are very similar whether the consumer is offline or online but some major differences are shopping environment and marketing communication.

The existing markets encompass a broad range of products and services. And are closely involved in online platform, which is defined as “purchases and sales of goods and services transacted over the Internet” (Choo & Bontis, 2002).

Nelson (1970, 1974), Darby and Karni (1973) divided products into three kinds, search products, experience products and credence products. (Tulay Girard, Paul Dion, 2010). They defined search products as consistent products that the clientele can know their size, quality performance, safety and style without using. Search products are logically suitable for selling online, because the clientele can know the entire attribute without using. Online selling has a higher pace of information communication and trading competence. Experience products are defined as very exacting category, whose attribute cannot be identified until being used for a long time. For this class of products, beginning and commendation from the service persons will be rather obligatory.

### **Brand Image**

In online shopping scenario, consumers like to use trusted company and brand names in place of product information while purchasing online (Ward and Lee, 2000). Jayawardhena et al. (2007) have established from their work that there is a considerable effect of brand orientation on customer online purchase intention.

E-brand/online brand reputation refers to the promising aspect of a company or e-brand /online, which refers to the intense promise made by an organization to its counterparts (e.g. customer), and, thus, necessary to the attain the performance of organization (Balmer, 2010). When a company meets its brand promise (i.e., shoppers get what they look for from a company), it supports in creating a positive brand image in the heads of customers (Argenti and Druckenmiller, 2004). Selnes (1993) contends that reputation of brand does not essentially focus only on brand and product, talking about the services industries, in that brand seems to be more associated with the company's reputation in comparison with the specific product. Also, reputation of the brand has been normally associated with trustworthiness (Newell and Goldsmith, 2001). For instance, by brand reputation (trustworthy brand), it describes brand equity for its intangible services and products (Aaker, 1991). Researchers argue that when talking about internet reputation, the trustworthiness characteristic is the very important as it tries to describe customer assurance in services and products and promotion claims; customer loyalty (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004) and is about company reputation (Newell and Goldsmith, 2001; Brodie et al., 2009). The causal factors of trustworthiness in services include company reputation, company name, personal features of the contact people, etc., as they represent dependability, honesty and believability and (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

### **Service Quality:**

A service happenstance, as said by Shostack (1985), is the “period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with a service” In different words, human contact is not a condition for a service encounter. Service Quality denotes a service provider continually fulfilling a customer's expectations. In order to do this, the service provider must be aware what the customer desires (Harvey, 1998). E-service quality is explained as fulfilling customer expectations excluding the service encounter depending upon human interaction. Zeithamal, Parasuraman, and Malhotra (2000) state to service quality for online purchasing as “the extent to which a web site facilitates efficient and effective shopping, purchasing and delivery” .

Zeithamal and Berry (1988) quoted that if experienced service is lower than the expected service, it implies poor service quality. But, when experienced service is more than the expected service, the apparent inference is that the quality of service is above satisfactory. In online markets, e-

service quality is a significant element. Nevertheless, providing an exact definition of e-service quality is little difficult as numerous definitions and explanations are present in the literature. Santos (2003) stated e-service quality is the ability of an e-service provider to satisfy the requirements of an e customer. Lee and Lin (2005) quoted e-service quality as general customer evaluation and judgment about the features and quality of online service delivery in the web space. Therefore, it can be concluded as the capability of an online service provider to handle and manage its customer interactions efficiently and effectively.

Wolfenbarger and Gilly (2003) claim that determining e-service quality should be more than the website interaction. It is because a consumer's online buying experience involves everything from the start as in a normal decision-making process: information search, product/service evaluation, final decision making, doing the transaction, product delivery/returns, and customer service. It is obvious that measures for assessing just the websites may not be enough for measuring quality of service for various stages of the e-tail service delivery. Fassnacht and Koesel (2006) point out, what consumers are looking for in the initial stage is service of high quality and not recovery. Good recovery is also required but may be in some instances, but it is not the main focus of what consumers want.

There are two important features that discriminate e-services and traditional services. First, the type of service encounters in e-services, particularly the absenteeism of human interaction, is unlike traditional services (Froehle & Roth, 2004). Second, e-services are naturally tendered as part of a larger multi-channel (MC) bundle of service, merging online services with those distributed through various other channels, such as the call and physical provisions (Sousa & Voss, 2006).

### **Social influence**

The significance of social influence in an online group purchasing (Kauffman et al., 2010b; Tai et al., 2012), particular attention is paid to its impact on customers' continuance intent to use a group-shopping web site. Previous studies have considered two constructs, i.e., subjective norm and critical mass, to describe the spirit of social influence in numerous contexts, such as online communication technologies (Van Slyke et al., 2007), online games (Chang et al., 2013) and

Web 2.0 services (Chen et al., 2012). Subjective norm is mainly theorized as social influence (Wangetal.,2013). It denotes to an individual's thought of what their reference group thinks where should they get involve in what kind of a behavior, which naturally reflects the normative influence resultant from an interconnected social reference group, i.e., compliance-based social influence (Venkatesh et al., 2003).

Critical mass as a type of social influence is important for two reasons. First, it has important inferences for predicting consumer behavior (Wattal et al., 2010). It denotes the point that what minimum number of users have accepted an innovation so that there is an increase in the acceptance of the innovation (Van Slyke et al., 2007). Perceived critical mass signifies the extent to which a consumer perceives that this thing has been achieved (Lou et al., 2000), which means that once the size of users attains a critical mass, additional number of people are inspired to join the network (Lin and Lu,2011). Second, critical mass signifies the result of system externality which effects online buying behavior (Kauffman et al., 2010b; Liu and Sutanto, 2012). The critical mass theory recommends that as an increase in the consumers who adopt an innovation, it is perceived as more beneficial to both earlier and probable adopters (Van Slyke et al., 2007). This is associated to the concept of system externality, which states about the value which a user derived by using a goods or service rises with the total of other users consuming the same good or service (Tseng and Teng, 2014). In short, both critical mass and system externality impart a same view: the worth of a technology rises with the number of its consumers. Subsequently the real critical mass is tough to determine, perceived critical mass is used to study the effect of critical mass on consumer behavior.

“It basically implies the pressure exerted from external environment like opinions and views of friends ,superiors ,relatives and peers which affects the individuals perception and behavior to engage in a certain work .This rationale works on the fact that customers will be influenced to a great extent by the uncertainty that will creep in because of any innovation such as e banking and this pushes them to consult their social networks on their acceptance decisions.Ali Tarhini EI-Masri Maged Ali Alan Serrano,(2016)”extending the UTAT model to understand the customer's acceptance and use of internet banking in Lebanon.

The relationship between commitment & loyalty is enhanced by social involvement. (Thatcher and George (2004). Online consumers favor relying on other consumers and in buying decision instead of formal ones like advertisements (Bansal and Voyer, 2000; Casalo, Flavian and Guinaliu, 2008). If the consumer is assured of fair number of members and peers consistently using the website and will use it in future as well the probability of the consumer remaining loyal gets high .(Floh and Treiblmaier ,2006).There is both direct and indirect impact of website quality on trust and satisfaction (Kandampully,2008) .There is a strong positive effects of convenience and web design on satisfaction .

### **Website Quality**

Tarafdar and Zhang (2008) conducted a research on portals, retail, search engines, entertainment, information, news and financial services and concluded that website reach is highly influenced by navigation ease, information content, security and usability. Convenience refers to efficiency of navigation and website's user friendliness (Chang and Chen ,2008). The ability of a website to make the user navigate the website with ease and convenience refers to the parameter" ease of use". It is the extent to which the prospective user anticipates the structure to be effortless. Srinivasan, Anderson and Ponnavaolu (2002) recommended that for a website to be comfortable to use, it should be simple, insightful as well as user-friendly. Often a user quits the website without making the purchase since they don't find it easy to steer through the website. It is more convenient for the user if uniformity persists in navigational and presentation modes. There is lot of time saving and ease in browsing if the website is convenient to use as the response time is shortened, transaction is completed fast and customer effort is minimized (Schaffer, 2000).

Website design:

Website fulfilment /reliability, website privacy and security, trust and website customer service were extensively used in defining quality of websites for e-tailing. As cited by Durkan, buyer trust on website is significant prior to the formation of positive attitude of online consumers. Buyer trust is related with privacy and security. This is backed by Djahantighi, who emphasized that online trust is the hindrance to an e-tailers to do well in online commercial. In online buying, when a customer is contented with the quality of website, then it will upsurge their involvement in online spending. This instigated customer come back to the website often and form more

positive image of the e-tailers. Website design is a significant factor affecting online consumers' intention to constantly use a website and is deemed to be one of customers' favorable areas with regards to online purchasing. Website Privacy, Trust and Security are the main points of concern of the online customers who want to go for buying online. According to Malhotra, Kim, and Agarwal, privacy concerns is a sensitive issue for the online customers due to the demands for purchasers' information. Perceived security is described as a threat that makes an incident lead to fiscal hardship to information or network reserves in the form of obliteration, revelations, alteration of data, and denial of service, deception. Henceforth, security is a vital concern for online customers and one of the most essential factors in the success of online business. Further, when a purchaser trusts the e-tailers, they believe in the online suppliers' ability to guard one's privacy and it is secure to finish an online transaction.

#### Hypotheses:

According to the literature part, when shopping with online channel, there are various factors which play a significant role, but this study limits to 4 factors: calling website design, social influence, brand image, service quality. Also, the influence of those 4 factors have on customers' decisions will differ with different category of products.

Besides this influence, customers' decisions will fluctuate with types of products. "Search products and "experience" products will make a distinction to the impact.

H1a.Brand image has a significant effect on Purchase Intention in search products

H1b. Brand image has a significant effect on Purchase Intention in experience products

H2a.E- Service quality has a significant effect on Purchase Intention in search products

H2b. E-Service Quality has a significant effect on Purchase Intention in experience products

H3a.Website Quality has a significant effect on Purchase Intention effect in search products.

H3b.Website Quality has a significant effect on Purchase Intention effect in experience products.

H4a.Social Influence has a significant effect on Purchase Intention effect in search products.

H4b. Social Influence has a significant effect on Purchase Intention effect in experience products.

Research Methodology:

We have adopted descriptive analytical research method for analyzing the data. Primary study was conducted using a sample size of 120 people. Using convenience sampling technique survey questionnaire based on the research variables was distributed to the respondents. The outcome was analyzed using correlation technique using SPSS.

The results are given below:

### Data Interpretation

SQ & PI

Correlations	Column 1	Column 2
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.71066905	1

**Search**

SQ & PI

Correlations	Column 1	Column 2
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.64549722	1

**Experience**

**Interpretation:** Correlation value of .710 & .645 indicates a strong relationship between service quality and purchase intention for search as well as experience goods respectively

BI & PI

Correlations	Column 1	Column 2
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.65561007	1

**Search**

BI & PI

Correlations	Column 1	Column 2
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.40824829	1

**Experience**

**Interpretation:** Correlation value of .655 & .408 indicates a high level of association between brand image and purchase intention for search and low level of association for experience goods respectively

Correlations	Column 1	Column 2
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.65561007	1

Correlations	Column 1	Column 2
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.71066905	1

### Search

### Experience

**Interpretation:** Correlation value of .655 & .710 indicates a level of association between website quality and purchase intention for search as well as experience goods respectively.

Correlations	Column 1	Column 2
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.40179348	1

Correlations	Column 1	Column 2
Column 1	1	
Column 2	0.71611487	1

### Search

### Experience

**Interpretation:** Correlation value of .401 indicates a low association between social influence and Purchase intention for search goods while it is .716 for credence goods which indicates a high level of association.

### Conclusion

The research focusses on the influence of 4 factors viz social influence, website quality, service quality & brand image on purchase intentions of consumers between search and experience goods. It indicates that that SI has a relatively high positive influence on purchase intentions for experience goods .So the marketers should ensure that the current users help in propagating it to others .In such a serviscapce consumers may be lured by affirmative word-of-mouth from their referent peers. In an endeavor to attract more customers, banks, healthcare and other experimental product marketers are too advised to augment the use of social forums and communities. Website quality and service quality play an equally important role in both search

and experience good's purchase intentions of consumers as simpler the online navigation and purchase process, higher is the possibility of using the channel. The influence of brand image on purchase intentions of consumers for experience goods becomes negligible as compared to a search good purchased online as is evident from the results. Thus marketers of search goods should channelize their efforts in building better brand reputation.

However, our research has certain limitations which can be improved during future research. Due to time constraints we could not cover the entire spectrum of search and experience goods. We have studied the effect of the factors on purchase intentions of search and experience goods individually though we can also study the interactive effect of all these factors and undertake a comparative research which can be a scope of future research.

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