

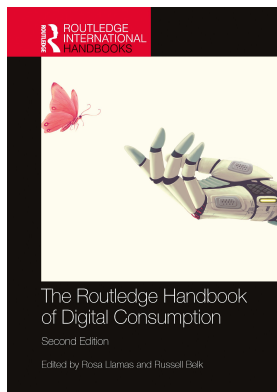
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CONSUMER DECISION MAKING IN OMNICHANNEL ENVIRONMENTS

Elfriede Penz and Margaret K. Hogg

Introduction

Digitization has fundamentally changed consumers' decision-making and experiences of shopping. Between 2009 and 2019, online shopping in the EU increased from 46% to 77% (Eurostat, 2021). Omnichannel retailing is defined as "the synergetic management of the numerous available channels and customer touchpoints, in such a way that the customer experience across channels and the performance over channels is optimized" (Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015, p. 176). This chapter surveys consumers' decision-making and purchasing in omnichannel environments. Consumers' attitudes and behaviors have changed in the omnichannel world, along with the mixture of channels they use and the purchasing processes (Yuruk-Kayapinar, 2020). We discuss how consumers increasingly pursue integrative (rather than different) purchasing strategies between online and offline settings.

We identify the factors affecting consumers' purchasing online and offline, the context for consumers' digital purchasing strategies within the decision-making process, and also consider the role of emotions. We trace changes that have flowed from the growth of the digital age, including within the classical stages of consumer behavior: search, choice, acquisition/purchase, consumption and use, and disposal.

Omnichannel retailing and consumer behavior

The way consumers shop has changed, showing high variations across information search, product comparison, and purchasing behaviors (Nam & Kannan, 2020). Consumers' shopping journeys are not completed within a single channel anymore, whether in physical or online stores. Instead, consumers use channels in combination (Aw, Kamal Basha, Ng, & Ho, 2021; Flavián, Gurrea, & Orús, 2020), they move freely between the different channels and shop for products and services using more than one retail channel in a single purchase (Yuruk-Kayapinar, 2020). Moreover, consumers go through the decision-making stages several times, which marks a shift toward more dynamic models of consumer decision-making (Ewerhard, Sisovsky, & Johansson, 2019).

The context for consumers' decision-making and experiences comprises patterns of channel usages, consumer purchase intentions, consumer responses, customer tolerance, customer value, and the customer journey (Mishra, Singh, & Koles, 2020). "Basket size, cross-category purchase volumes, and customer satisfaction (with previously used channels) are the major drivers of new channel adoption" (Bilgicer, Jedidi, Lehmann, & Neslin, 2015, p. 256). Consumers' beliefs regarding channel attributes for either search or purchase, marketing efforts, and customer demographics determine channel choice. Verhoef, Neslin, & Vroomen, (2007). Once customers adopt a new channel or become multichannel, they are more likely to adopt other new channels (Ward, 2001) at faster rates (Venkatesan, Kumar, & Ravishanker, 2007).

Depending on their perceptions about whether a product or service is best bought from one or the other, consumers select a particular shopping mode (offline versus online store, Rajamma, Paswan, & Ganesh, 2007), or they combine them (Herhausen, Binder, Schoegel, & Herrmann, 2015). Two behaviors can be observed: "showrooming" which describes customers' experiencing products in the physical store and then buying them online; and "webrooming" which describes customers researching products online but purchasing them in a physical store (Kumar, Anand, & Song, 2017). While webrooming has a positive impact on customer satisfaction, showrooming is related to price savings and to perceived quality gains (Cortiñas, Chocarro, & Elorz, 2019; Flavián, Gurrea, & Orús, 2016). For example, consumers search for information online (browse websites, use banner ads and search for promotions) and on their smartphones before visiting and buying in physical stores. Thus, consumers switch between the channels at different stages of their decision-making (Aw et al., 2021; Flavián et al., 2016), often with the aim of maximizing the benefits of shopping (Arora & Sahney, 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Since decision-making through the use of the Internet has become more complex, it is no surprise that retailers are not the only source of information anymore. Other consumers provide information to each another, which diminishes the control and the impact of retailers over consumer behavior (Ewerhard et al., 2019). Therefore, important questions relate to the influence of the social environment in omnichannel retailing (Cai & Lo, 2020); in fact, experiencing social interaction during the process is part of offline and online shopping (To, Liao, & Lin, 2007).

Channel choice is related to consumers' belief that people similar to them use that channel or to social norms. In this respect, social contagion, i.e. "the impact of a customer's network of peers and influencers on her adoption of a new channel" (Bilgicer et al., 2015, p. 254) was found to accelerate the diffusion of a new channel. In particular, longer-standing customers are less influenced by social contagion and adopt new channels faster, as consumers are adopting a *means* to purchase a product (compared to the product itself). Due to their potential to provide cross-channel complementarities, the use of the information services from different channels, in particular information search services and product delivery services, are found to be the most frequent cross-channel combinations (Cortiñas et al., 2019). As a consequence, so-called research shopping can be observed (Verhoef et al., 2007).

Consumers' integrative purchasing strategies

Early research identified some fundamental differences between consumers' online purchase behavior and their traditional shopping patterns (Dennis, Harris, & Sandhu, 2002), and established that *consumers' motivation* to shop online differs from their motivation when shopping in the offline retail environment for identical products (Xiao, Guo, & D'Ambra, 2019). Table 23.1 summarizes segmentation approaches.

Hedonic motivation, together with personalization, influences the cognitive and emotional aspects of the customer experience in multichannel retail contexts (Tyrväinen,

Table 23.1 Segments of Online, Combined Online and Offline, and Omnichannel Shoppers

Types	Segments	Authors
Online	Convenience shoppers, Variety seekers, Balanced buyers, Store-oriented shoppers Active shoppers, Price sensitives, Discerning shoppers, Brand loyals, Convenience-oriented Apathetic shoppers, Bargain seekers, Basic shoppers, Destination shoppers, E-Window shoppers, Interactive shoppers, Shopping enthusiasts	Rohm and Swaminathan (2004) Jayawardhena et al. (2007) Ganesh, Reynolds, Luckett, and Pomirleanu (2010)
Combined online and offline	On-off shoppers, Dual shoppers, Information surfers	Kau, Tang, and Ghose (2003)
Omnichannel	Internet-focused – anti-mobile, Internet-focused – multichannel enthusiasts, Research online – purchase offline (ROPO) – anti- mobile/social media, ROPO – multichannel enthusiasts, ROPO – social media enthusiasts	Sands, Ferraro, Campbell and Pallant (2016)

Source: Own elaboration.

Karjaluoto, & Saarijärvi, 2020). In this environment, consumers’ shopping motivations (both utilitarian and hedonic) can be explained by their perceptions of risks, convenience, and costs (Jo, Kim, & Choi, 2020).

Although prices (*functional motivation*) are more transparent in online stores, and often are more homogenous, getting the lowest price is not always important. Infomediaries or “shopbots” contribute to price savings and well-being on the part of consumers and greater price competition among dealers (Viswanathan, Kuruzovich, Gosain, & Agarwal, 2007). Consumers are interested in the security of information-transfer and vendor reliability, rather than only in convenience (Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004).

With increasing digitalization in the retail environment, fun or pleasure now also results from technology use (Venkatesh, Thong, & Xu, 2012). While in the physical store context, consumers seek enjoyment, entertainment, and exploration, in the online context, consumers’ hedonic motivations include adventure, authority, and status. For some consumers utilitarian motives, such as convenience, cost saving, information availability, and selection prevail (To et al., 2007).

Enjoyment (*non-functional motivation*) arises partly from the unique features of the Internet and predicts consistently strong attitudes toward interactive shopping. Consumers find it more enjoyable to shop in interactive environments than shopping in physical environments (Childers, Carr, Peck, & Carson, 2001). Eventually, online shoppers’ excitement increases their intention to return (Chanaka & Tiu Wright, 2009). Growth of consumer-generated media has allowed consumers to easily compare experiences, which give rise to self-enhancement (Chan & Cui, 2011).

Substitutability, that is, the ability of online shopping to compensate for the lack of sensory inputs as compared to traditional ‘bricks’ shopping (product knowledge, quality, information, and its tangible attributes), affects online purchase intentions (Charles, Chanaka, & Eleni-Konstantina, 2010). If substitutability is perceived as low, despite a positive attitude toward online shopping and past positive online shopping experiences, consumers prefer offline shopping. However, high trust in an online retailer can compensate for low substitutability (Dennis, Jayawardhena, & Papamatthaiou, 2010).

Trust determines whether a website is perceived as reliable and eventually influences the transaction intention (Gefen, 2002; Gefen & Straub, 2004; McKnight & Chervany, 2001) as well as the long-term relationships with the retailer (Kim, Ferrin, & Rao, 2009). Important dimensions of trust are ability, integrity, and benevolence, which emerge from elements in a website. They impact the loyalty to a website (Gupta & Kabadayi, 2010). In addition, the perceived trustworthiness of Internet merchants influences consumer trust.

Some of the changes that occur with omnichannel retailing relate to the high number of touchpoints through which customers can interact with companies, making the customer experience more social in nature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

In the customer journey, online and offline channels differed in benefits and costs but due to technological advances and the diffusion of new channels, these differences have diminished. Also, customers have different preferences for and usage patterns of channels across the customer journey. In a recent study, adoption barriers for young consumers in the omnichannel context were identified along with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. The most significant barriers were inconsistency in price, content, discounts, and lack of coordination and integration (Sharma, Gupta, & Joshi, 2019). Therefore, identifying omnichannel customer segments is important. This is even more relevant as some channel choices, e.g., in the purchase funnel, affect each other due to lock-in effects, channel inertia, and cross-channel synergies (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Problem recognition, information search, evaluation, purchasing, and post purchase

Consumer decision-making is regularly modeled as a process, including *problem recognition*, *search for information*, *evaluation and choice of alternatives*, *purchase of the product or service*, and finally *consumption* and *(dis)satisfaction* with the retailer and/or the product (Solomon, Askegaard, Hogg, & Bamossy, 2019). Omnichannel customers' activities within each stage of their journey have changed due to channel integration. In *prepurchase*, for instance, "price comparisons can be conducted on smartphones; in the *purchase stage*, consumers can select from a range of payment and delivery options online and offline; and the *post-purchase* stage includes a focus on consumption experience, service, returns, and repurchase, as well as word-of-mouth (WOM), engagement, and loyalty." (Alexander & Kent, 2020, p. 2).

Starting with *problem recognition*, in online decision-making stimuli can come from different sources, including online marketing communications and traditional communications. Online advertising differs from traditional advertising in that consumers actively search for information by visiting a website. There is widespread agreement that website traffic is dependent on offline communication (Jayawardhena, Wright, & Masterson, 2003). Moreover, with increasing media multitasking, for instance watching TV while using a tablet browsing websites (online), advertisement messages need to be coordinated to be effective. Also, the broader context, for instance what consumers are doing, where they are located, and what other devices they use during the time of ads-exposure, is expected to influence effectiveness (Liu-Thompkins, 2019).

As regards the *search* stage, consumers' shopping motives influence their choice of search channel (online vs. offline), their selection of search platform (mobile devices vs. PCs) in respect of certain product types (search goods vs. experience goods). In the *search* for information online (e.g., Peterson & Merino, 2003), the Internet empowers consumers by making price, company, product, and competitors' information available in order to improve decision-making (e.g., López & Sicilia, 2011; van Nierop, Leeflang, Teerling, & Huizingh, 2011).

Online consumers, unlike traditional consumers, use technology to collect information about products or brands they want to buy. However, sources of information may easily change and different channels shape consumers' perception about products, services, or information (Yuruk-Kayapinar, 2020).

In the *information search phase* of decision-making, opinions from others influence consumers and their decision-making. These personal conversations, *WOM*, about goods or experiences, mainly take place between people and usually are not commercially influenced. Traditional *WOM* can decrease perceived risk and increase willingness to purchase online. The technological advancement of communication through the Internet facilitates the expression of opinions about goods and affects social interaction between consumers and companies (López & Sicilia, 2011).

With regard to offline and online purchasing, the increased complexity of products, combined with the increasing availability of product information, favors the *eWOM* (electronic *WOM*) channel over the offline *WOM* channel. *eWOM* is defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004, p. 39). Because *eWOM* can be searched easily, it is assumed to have an even greater influence on decision-making (López & Sicilia, 2011), it increases the credibility of the source (Sundermann & Raabe, 2019) and aims at activating consumers' interaction with online platforms (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Social media influencers – “a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011, p. 90) – can be categorized into micro-influencers (i.e. targeting a niche audience to create loyalty and credibility in products) and macro-influencers (i.e. reaching a wider market and diverse groups and creating awareness) (Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020) and provide consumers with guidance in their purchases.

Consumers utilize *eWOM* because they are faced with increasingly complex products. Vast amounts of information are available and in order to simplify their search for and evaluation of goods they focus on relevant information from *eWOM* (Godes et al., 2005).

Thus, while the *purchasing* processes of digital consumers and offline consumers are similar and both engage in high-involvement and low-involvement purchases, they use different tools (e.g., social media websites), are affected by different factors (e.g., filters, search engines), and affect others in different ways (e.g., sharing online reviews and ratings with others). Digital and offline consumers with high involvement experience all the purchasing processes in detail but in different settings, from problem identification to information search, evaluation, and decision-to-buy through to post-purchase, whereas consumers with low involvement do not spend much effort to buy a product/service, no matter in which setting (Yuruk-Kayapinar, 2020). However, low-involvement and inexpensive purchases, such as ordering a vinyl record online, can develop into a high-involvement purchase if the respective album is added to a collection of 2,000 vinyl albums, which was assembled over a ten-year timeframe. Several digital and offline purchasing processes may be experienced, for instance, the collector is spending some time and effort to find the right addition to fit the collection.¹

Purchasing patterns are not equivalent to online *visit* patterns. Purchasing consists of visiting and conversion from browsing to actual buying (Moe & Fader, 2001). Besides, online shoppers and online *non*-shoppers are considered to be heterogeneous groups (Swinyard & Smith, 2003). In a similar vein, understanding purchase orientations is not necessarily linked to purchase intentions (Jayawardhena, Wright, & Dennis, 2007).

In the *post-purchase phase*, dissatisfaction leads to an unbalanced state and writing online reviews can resolve dissatisfaction. In particular, negative WOM plays an important role. Depending on the type of message, negative WOM can have different effects on dissatisfied consumers: attribute-based messages (highlighting the product) trigger a product-evaluative process and result in dissatisfaction aggravation. On the other hand, experience-based messages (highlighting the consumer) trigger a social-comparative process and result in dissatisfaction alleviation. Dissatisfaction alleviation works only when the consumer experience is salient, thus it is explicitly referred to, in the negative WOM message. “Social-comparative rather than product-evaluative process may predominate in this stage, as dissatisfied consumers find relief in the realization that someone else has had a similar or worse experience” (Chan & Cui, 2011, p. 334). Online consumer product reviews are important sources for decision-making (Chen & Xie, 2008). These reviews, which are created by users, are considered more credible and trustworthy than marketing messages. Past research has mostly investigated valence and volume of online reviews, while issues on how the emotional content of online reviews influence consumers were only recently investigated (Zablocki, Makri, Schlegelmilch, & Houston, 2019). As regards their impact on perceived helpfulness, research found that depending on the product category, online reviews with fear aspects are perceived as useful for medical substances while reviews including joy are perceived as useful for jewelry (Felbermayr & Nanopoulos, 2016).

The role of emotions in omnichannel decision-making

Consumer decision processes are affected by the uncertainties incurred both online and offline (Du, Wang, & Hu, 2019). Emotions represent key components of consumer experiences in online and offline retail environments and influence behavior and purchase intentions (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2003; Menon & Kahn, 2002; Shobeiri, Mazaheri, & Laroche, 2015). The consumer experience “includes the physical and emotional experiences of customers when interacting with products, systems and services [...] during all of the stages experienced by the customer” (Bascur & Rusu, 2020, p. 3). The experiential components (sensory, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, lifestyle, and relational) explain the multidimensional structure of customer experience. The experience results from the contact with the company but also through the influence of others (Bascur & Rusu, 2020). In a study of the entire omnichannel experience, it was shown that emotional (e.g., being relaxed, feeling good) and cognitive (e.g., testing and learning about new products) aspects of customer experience affected loyalty and WOM (Tyrväinen et al., 2020).

Emotions that arise at the beginning of a website visit influence subsequent cognitive processing and shape privacy beliefs. Being afraid could lead to escape behavior, i.e. leaving the online store; however, the relevance of the information that is provided on the website and privacy policies can adjust these beliefs (Li, Sarathy, & Xu, 2011). The interface influences consumers’ emotions in the initial stage of browsing. Consequently, cognitive evaluations and site atmospherics (site informativeness and effectiveness) are influenced by the initially aroused emotions (Mazaheri, Richard, & Laroche, 2011), which in turn affect the evaluation of atmospherics and impact purchase intentions in the long run. The design of the webpage determines the atmosphere experienced by consumers online (McCarthy & Aronson, 2000), it leads to positive emotions, and thus to favorable attitudes toward online shopping and the presented goods, and consequently higher satisfaction with a purchase (Eroglu et al., 2003). In addition, web esthetics are sensory stimuli which enhance customer experience; they include color, graphics, layout, and design and they lead to enjoyment, satisfaction, and eventually purchase intentions (Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012).

In general, the positive or negative emotional experience influences the information processing and builds long-term associations in consumers' memories. To this end, behaviors result, such as recommendations (Tyrväinen et al., 2020). In the omnichannel context, the quality of omnichannel integration and its perceived value impact satisfaction and loyalty, such as in the banking context (Wagner Mainardes, Anderson de Moura Rosa, & Neris Nossa, 2020). Past encounters shape future preferences for omnichannel shopping (Shi, Wang, Chen, & Zhang, 2020). To conclude, positive experiences at different touchpoints in the consumer decision-making process increase loyalty intentions (Mishra et al., 2020).

While most research focuses on the positive emotions that result from the retail environment, there is some evidence for the influence of negative emotions stimulated by aspects of the retail setting on consumer behavior. Shopping irritants as identified by d'Astous (2000) fit into the categories of ambience (bad smell, too hot inside the store, music too loud for offline settings; and slow loading of webpages, unpleasant environment, such as an Internet café when browsing for online contexts) and design (unable to locate items, bricks-and-mortar store too small; poor display of products in the online store, bad website design); categories previously identified by Baker (1986). Shopping irritants also stem from social factors, such as crowding or the behavior of the sales personnel (high-pressure selling) or unfavorable information regarding the product (Mizerski, 1982).

In the online context, these irritants include negative or ambivalent product reviews and eWOM as well as the appearance of avatars for example (England & Gray, 1998). In addition, overload, i.e. consumers feeling "overwhelmed or ill-prepared during the purchasing process and the sheer volume of purchasing decisions to be made" (Otnes, Lowrey, & Shrum, 1997, p. 87), which is very likely to happen in an online environment, can cause mixed emotions (i.e. ambivalence). In addition to negative or positive emotions with regard to the retail environment, ambivalence can have severe consequences on consumer behavior, such as satisfaction with products, repurchase loyalty, or conflicts faced by consumers in offline and online retail settings (Otnes et al., 1997; Penz & Hogg, 2011; Ruth, Brunel, & Otnes, 2002). Consumers who experience ambivalence seem to be less loyal, partly because they are also less satisfied. Ambivalent consumers are also less involved in product evaluations (Olsen, Wilcox, & Olsson, 2005).

Conclusion

Radical technological developments have significantly impacted consumer decision-making and experiences in omnichannel environments. Consumers have gained experience with multiple shopping channels and this has developed into what we might term "omnichannel choice proficiency." A benefit of one channel over another is often perceived by its convenience while cost is seen as a risk. However, consumers accept recurring problems to some extent (Trenz, Veit, & Chee-Wee, 2020).

Our chapter shows how understanding of consumer purchasing online and offline has changed and discusses the new emerging consumer purchasing strategies. In tracking research into how consumers have responded to digital developments in retailing, we saw how consumers have increasingly adopted overlapping and integrative (rather than necessarily different) purchasing strategies between online and offline settings. It is these consumer forays into integrating the different parts of the retail offering, online and offline, within the phases of the consumer decision-making process, which promises to be the source of many rich research questions in the future as consumers adopt increasingly creative solutions to their purchasing needs, often integrating different aspects of the two modes in seeking solutions to their consumption needs and purchases. In attracting consumers, both offline and

online retailers have seized the opportunity to exploit the opportunities offered by the digitization of text, images, sound, objects, and signals in promoting and distributing their products.

Future academic research will want to examine how far consumers' early learning from their digital experiences impacts their future purchasing behaviors online; and within the context of consumer socialization, which theories of learning most effectively account for consumers' varying patterns of behavior online. A major motivation for consumers to go online is to satisfy their need for information and learn new things. Virtual stores where consumers interact with assistants or avatars and virtual environments develop because of higher levels of immersion, interactivity, and engagement. Navigational aids and orientation cues in general increase users' efficiency and eventually satisfaction (Shukla, Sharma, & Swami, 2011). The interactivity with avatars (i.e. graphic representation that can be animated by means of computer technology, Holzwarth, Janiszewski, & Neumann, 2006) was found to have positive benefits for online shoppers. Avatars can help in building trust in the store, which ultimately leads to more satisfaction and better evaluations (Solomon & Wood, 2009).

However, the online environment, in contrast to brick-and-mortar retail environment, changes quickly (for example, informational websites become transactional; virtual communities and virtual worlds are combined with e-commerce) and consumers need to adapt to these new aspects. They need to learn how to deal with impersonal information, in the form of eWOM, infomediaries, or avatars. Also, websites include a lot of individual cues. In short, information overload requires consumers to carefully select websites and information. In addition, studying consumer socialization processes around online purchase behavior provides an invaluable opportunity to explore new developments in reverse socialization where younger family members induct older family members into different aspects of the digital online age.

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Note

- 1 We thank an anonymous reviewer for providing us with this personal example.

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