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‘Key Determinants Shaping College Students’ Preference for Online Shopping over Traditional Retail Stores in Urban Areas’

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ABSTRACT :

This study investigates the evolving preferences of urban college students in India toward online shopping over traditional retail stores. Using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and semi-structured interviews of 200 students from major metropolitan areas, the research identifies convenience, price sensitivity, peer influence, and technological ease as primary drivers. Findings reveal a hybrid shopping behavior where offline retail remains relevant for categories requiring physical inspection. The paper concludes with strategic recommendations for online and offline retailers aiming to engage the digitally native Gen Z demographic.

Keywords : Online Shopping, Traditional Retail, College Students, Consumer Behavior, Urban India, E-commerce, Gen Z, Hybrid Shopping Behavior.

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed consumer behavior worldwide. In India, widespread internet penetration, smartphone affordability, and the proliferation of digital payment systems have made e-commerce an integral part of daily life. Among the fastest adopters are urban college students, who balance academics, internships, and active social lives. This study explores the motivations behind their growing preference for online shopping and the implications for traditional retail models.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Consumer Behavior in the Digital Age

As Kotler (2019) explains, consumer behavior is shaped by psychological, social, and technological influences. In the digital era, shopping is increasingly driven by search algorithms, digital advertisements, and social media recommendations (Laudon & Traver, 2021).

2.2 Key Influencing Factors

- Convenience: 24/7 accessibility and time-saving features (Sharma & Batra, 2020).
- Price Sensitivity: Students are drawn to discounts and cashback offers (Agarwal & Singh, 2019).
- Peer and Social Media Influence: Friends, influencers, and digital trends heavily sway choices (Verma & Jain, 2020).
- Trust and Security: Preference for reputed platforms offering secure transactions (Deloitte, 2021).

2.3 Offline Shopping Perceptions

Despite the rise of e-commerce, offline shopping provides tactile experiences, immediate gratification, and emotional satisfaction, making it significant for certain product categories.

2.4 Theoretical Frameworks

- Technology Acceptance Model (TAM): Perceived usefulness and ease of use drive technology adoption (Davis, 1989).
- Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB): Attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control influence online shopping intentions (Ajzen, 1991).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A descriptive, mixed-methods approach was employed to gain both quantitative and qualitative insights.

3.2 Sampling

- Population: College students (18–24 years) in Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, and Pune.
- Sample Size: 200 survey respondents; 10 participants for interviews.
- Sampling Method: Stratified random sampling based on gender, academic discipline, and city.

3.3 Data Collection

- Survey Tool: Google Forms questionnaire (20 questions; both closed and open-ended).
- Interview Tool: Semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom/phone.

3.4 Data Analysis

- Quantitative: SPSS and Microsoft Excel for descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and correlation analysis.
- Qualitative: Thematic analysis of interview transcripts.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants gave informed consent, and data anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained.

4. Results

4.1 Demographics

- 56% female, 44% male respondents.
- 75% aged between 18–20 years.

4.2 Online Shopping Behavior

- Frequency: 70% shop online monthly; 25% weekly.
- Preferred Products: Fashion, electronics, personal care.
- Primary Platforms: Amazon (58%), Myntra (28%), Flipkart (12%).

4.3 Motivations for Online Shopping

- Convenience, discounts, product variety, and doorstep delivery emerged as dominant factors.

4.4 Barriers to Offline Shopping

- Long queues, higher prices, and limited variety were primary deterrents.

4.5 Retained Offline Preferences

- Students prefer offline shopping for tactile experiences like trying clothes and testing gadgets.

5. Discussion

The study confirms that while online shopping dominates among students, traditional stores still retain importance for specific needs. Students exhibit hybrid shopping behavior, selecting online or offline modes depending on the product category and immediacy of need.

The Technology Acceptance Model and Theory of Planned Behavior successfully explain this behavior: students prioritize usefulness, ease of use, and peer influence in their shopping decisions. Moreover, personalization, mobile-first experiences, and seamless service are key expectations from retailers.

6. Conclusion

Online shopping is the preferred mode among urban college students due to its unparalleled convenience and affordability. However, offline retail remains relevant for high-involvement purchases requiring physical inspection. Retailers must embrace an omnichannel strategy, combining the strengths of digital and physical experiences to stay competitive in the evolving retail landscape.

7. Recommendations

For Online Retailers

- Enhance mobile app performance.
- Provide real-time support and transparent delivery tracking.
- Create student-exclusive offers and loyalty programs.
- Personalize product suggestions using AI.
- Introduce gamified shopping experiences to increase engagement.

For Traditional Retailers

- Implement omnichannel solutions (e.g., online order and offline pickup).
- Offer interactive, tech-enabled in-store experiences.
- Shorten billing and checkout times with digital kiosks.
- Launch campus-focused marketing initiatives.
- Adopt and promote sustainable practices to align with Gen Z values.

8. Future Scope

- Comparative studies involving rural and semi-urban students.
- Examination of augmented reality and social commerce influences.
- Longitudinal studies to track behavior changes post-graduation.
- Detailed analysis of payment preferences among college students.

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