

Lived Experiences of College Students in Online Shopping

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Abstract— Online shopping has recently expanded rapidly as an important outlet for consumers to purchase products directly. The study explored the lived experiences of college students in online shopping. It was conducted in one of the higher education institutions in Ozamiz City. The study used the qualitative approach using a phenomenological research design. It was conducted among eight selected college students through purposive sampling. The responses were elicited using interview guide questions and analyzed using the Moustakas six-step transcendental phenomenology. Results revealed four themes: convenience in product selection, perceived product expectation versus reality, poor assurance of product quality, and diminished instant satisfaction. The buying behavior of college students who engaged in online shopping changes because of their convenient and hassle-free experiences, especially in product selection and expectation. It is recommended that further study be conducted to include professionals, and forewarn online shoppers to be extra careful in considering online shops and product reviews to avoid negative experiences.

Keywords— customer experience, decision-making online shopping, shopping activity, shopping motives

INTRODUCTION

Online shopping has recently expanded rapidly in India as an important outlet for consumers, bringing a consequent growing interest in comparison shopping engines that led to the creation of many websites offering this service, such as shopping.com, PriceGrabber, Shopzilla, and others. Users can make comparisons from different vendor offerings based on the price and features of various products (Kiran & Boora, 2019). Consumers easily compare prices offered online since price dispersion is always at stake in online shops. Price dispersion refers to setting prices differently among sellers of the same product in a given market. Studying the factors influencing price dispersion is of great importance to retailers, most especially in online shops, as it affects their ability to charge different prices from their competitors. The recent trends towards multi and omnichannel retailing have increased the importance of studying price dispersion and comparing price dispersion between online and offline markets (Zhuang, Leszczyc, & Lin, 2018).

The behavior of a user on a price comparison platform is an interesting phenomenon that needs to be analyzed. There is good evidence to believe that users often can change their minds on which product to buy after browsing through related products (Gupta, Mittal, Singla, & Bagchi, 2017). With the online shopping application, the characteristics of customers who are shopping online have changed. Shoppers usually trust

the product information provided by other customers through customer reviews more than the information given by the company, and this has led to more active production and distribution of information by customers. Historically, customers have been reluctant to buy service products and clothes online, but the contributions of those sales are increasing. Also, various informational experiences are becoming active through a proactive exchange of feedback in the online community of customers (Song, 2015).

Customers are replacing their way of conventional shopping as they penetrate other customers in creating a purchasing decision with the use of the internet. With this, the unprecedented increase in internet-based purchasing volume creates a dynamic shift in consumer decision-making patterns. Customers are relying on the internet for their daily needs and even customizing their needs with the help of digital technology. In this sense, the maintenance of customer relationships becomes the core operation of any business (Kumar, Mangla, Luthra, Rana, & Dwivedi, 2018).

Shopping behaviors must be carefully examined with the idea of customer relationship management in the online shopping network, which specifically defines the virtual shopping experience (Chan, 2012). Experience is a combination of activities including continuous-time, expectation, emotional engagement, and uniqueness, which is different from general things (Shu-Hao, Wen-Hai Chih, Liou, & Yu-Ting, 2016). In other studies,

experience is considered as cognition or information derived from the reciprocal reaction, among other environmental factors provided by the service providers (Gupta and Vajic, 2015). In addition, experience is emphasized as a combination of a practical aspect that essentially translates to a high level of emotional intensity (Berry et al., 2012).

Experience is therefore considered to be highly subjective, having practical and emotional aspects of consumers as it reciprocates with environmental factors, which in effect generate an emotional being of a consumer who is engaged in a certain activity. In this perspective, several types of experiences in online shopping are drawn from consumer behavior which usually includes: the sensation of feeling, creativity, and cognitive thought, lifestyle-related action, and relating it to the norms of society which is social identity by the reference group and culture as customer engaged in trendy shopping activity (Song, 2015).

In shopping study, several factors are highlighted in the online shopping experience, which includes: tangibility, reliability, less personal interaction, product variety, and cost of the product offered which is in contrast with what the consumer will experience when shopping with physical stores (Akroush & Al-Debei's, 2015). With the online shopping experience, it has been pointed out that Internet shopping meets 70 percent of customer expectations for convenience, customized service, and variety of product selection (Bauboniene & Guleviciute, 2015). With this, customers would become even more interested in online shopping if they encounter a purpose-focused website than a website-focused encounter (Anil, Fevzi, Khaldoun, & Milos, 2014).

The integrated shopping motives concerning retail distribution can be done in practical or rational dimensions when considering the shopping environment in online shopping (Zheng, Chen, & Zhang, 2020). Ideally, the online shopping experience highlights the definition of convenience that refers to the shortest time in accomplishing a particular task with the least energy consumption. As the fundamental principle of the purchasing decision-making process, this definition is further developed in the form of time and effort (Anderson and Shugan, 2011).

This research explores the lived experiences of college students in online shopping. The research method involving selected participants is presented. The results

provide insights into the physical, ideological, and pragmatic dimensions of the online shopping experience. The findings also show that the online shopping experiences differ greatly depending on certain personal characteristics, their social interaction, and the circumstance and placing their faith and confidence in the agents of recommendation.

Objective of the Study

Explore the lived experiences of college students in online shopping.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The study used the qualitative approach using a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on the commonality of shared experiences within a given community. The basic aim of the method is to arrive at a definition of the essence of the unique phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Interviews are usually performed with a group of individuals with firsthand knowledge of a case, circumstance, or experience. Two specific questions seek to address the interview(s) (Mosutaka's, 1994): What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced your experiences of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013)? Other forms of data such as documents, observations, and art may also be used. The data is then read and reread and culled for like phrases and themes that are then grouped to form clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2013). Through this process, the researcher may construct the universal meaning of the event, situation, or experience and arrive at a more profound understanding of the phenomenon. The design was considered appropriate in exploring the lived experiences of college students engaged in online shopping.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in one of the higher education institutions in Ozamiz City, which is situated in Misamis Occidental in the Northern part of Mindanao. It has 11 colleges with a graduate school offering graduate and post-graduate studies. It offers 56 academic programs, including undergraduate to graduate programs, and 22 have been submitted voluntarily to accrediting agencies. At present, the institution is accredited by the Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities Commission on Accreditation (PACUCOA). At present, the university is enjoying the benefits as an autonomous

school in Northern Mindanao. In this study, the research setting is focused on the College of Business and Management.

Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were 8 BSBA students through purposive sampling. The following were the inclusion criteria considered in the identification of the participants: 1) have engaged in online shopping; and 2) had given the consent to participate in the study.

Instrument

This study used the researcher-made interview guide questions to elicit responses during the interviews. Before the interviews with the actual participants, the interview questions were tried on the selected students not included as actual participants. The questions which seemed vague were then improved based on the pilot interviews conducted. There were ten final questions given: five opening questions, four core questions, and one exit question.

Data Collection

Before the conduct of the study, approval of the Dean of the Graduate School was sought. Similarly, permission was obtained from the Officer-in-Charge in the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs of the institution. After the approval was gained, the researcher met the target participants and explained the purpose of the study. Then, the researcher and the participants agreed on the schedules of the interviews. A series of interviews followed according to the preferred time of the participants. Recording materials were used during the actual interviews. The transcription of the interviews was performed for data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

In compliance with the research ethics and protocol, the researcher observed the following ethical considerations: (1) Informed consent was given to the participants to make them aware of the reason for conducting the study, (2) participants were assured of having confidentiality and privacy of their answers, and (3) participants were informed that they could withdraw their participation in the study at any time they wished to.

Data Analysis

The study used the (Moustakas, 1994) data analysis technique of phenomenological reduction. The following are the steps in the phenomenological

reduction which served as a guide in analyzing the data gathered: (1) Bracketing, (2) Horizontalization, (3) Clustering into Themes, (4) Textural Description, (5) Structural Description, and (6) Textural-Structural Synthesis. Bracketing is an approach that was used to mitigate the effects of preconceived notions and perceptions held before the study started. It is a process of suspending judgments and biases, or 'epoche.'

Horizontalization follows, which refers to the listing of verbatim expressions that were observed in the conduct of the interview. Initially, the researcher looked into each statement with equal value, and statements that were found irrelevant, repetitive, overlapping, and outside the scope of the study, were ignored. Horizons, which were the remaining sections after the data had been polished, were considered as the constituent and meaningful parts of the phenomenon. According to (Moustakas, 1994), "horizons are unlimited, and it is a never-ending process."

For the third step, clustering was done in obtaining inferences from the study. It involved the reduction of experiences to invariant horizons, creating core themes, and validation of the invariant horizons using multiple data sources. In reducing the statements into horizons, the researcher clustered them into themes and ensured that each theme was implied only one meaning. This was considered as placing the phenomenon into a "textural language." To validate the invariant horizons obtained from the study, the researcher reviewed the findings of research studies using methods other than the data-gathering methods being used in the study like observation, field note-taking, focus group interviews, and related literature. This validation process was crucial to the accuracy and clarity of the representations.

Textural description, or 'what occurred,' refers to an account that describes the perception of the phenomenon. In obtaining the textural description of the experience of the participants, the researcher used the verbatim excerpts in the interview and provided a narration of the meaning units which were derived from the themes. Structural description, or 'how it occurred', is the integration of imaginative variation, which is an ingenious outlook and insights into the textural description. An imaginative variation is considered as the mental experiment on analyzing the details and structures of the participants' experience by being detached from natural inclination through epoche. It is

appended in each paragraph of textural descriptions to generate a structural description.

In the textural-structural synthesis process, the researcher collated the meaning units of each of the participants and developed from them a composite of textural and structural descriptions that were common to them. A narrative or synthesis represented all the participants, written from a third-person perspective. The primary goal of this final step of Moustakas' method was to obtain the essence of the experience of the phenomenon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of college students in online shopping. The face-to-face interviews conducted revealed that the college students as online shoppers experienced the following: convenience in product selection, perceived product expectation versus reality, poor assurance product quality, and diminished instant satisfaction.

Convenience in product selection

Online shopping provides consumers convenience in choosing a wide range of product categories since numerous online sellers post imitated and original brands. They find it easy to access the online shop if they have the internet. In this way, the participants of the study cited that online shopping provides them with wide access to different product assortments and categories since they are directed with the product they are looking for. In one way or another, they have the freedom to choose the product they want. Below are some of the participants' responses who cited the convenience and wide assortment of the product category,

"I find it as a good site for shoppers who wish to have a hassle-free shopping since they will just directly scroll the product categories posted online as they are directed with the product that they are going to purchase. In connection to that, they can also contact sellers of the product if they wish, by leaving a message to the direct seller." (P3)

"I perceived online shopping as a good venue since the products offered are varied and convenient." (P4)

"I perceived online shopping to be more convenient than the physical store since it offers a wide array of

product categories in which customers can choose freely." (P8)

It has been found out from the responses of the participants that online shopping is considered a good site for finding a variety of product assortments. Accordingly, shoppers are directed toward the products that they are looking for. Participants 4 and 8 cited that online shopping provides a wide array of product categories for shoppers to choose freely on the products that they want. Moreover, Participant 3 cited that another feature for convenience brought by online shopping is the accessibility to the seller for inquiries and verifications.

Bauboniene and Guleviciute (2015) cited that in most cases, online shopping is popularly subscribed among consumers in recent times considering its convenience and simplicity. The payment is more convenient, with its ability to obtain a required service or product without leaving from home, and becomes a rational assessment of the price compared to the price of the same product or service in different stores, as well as the prompt acquisition of product-related information.

As the modernized world evolves, customers get to engage in the most convenient way of acquiring goods and services with just one click of their finger. Consumers can use search engines and price comparison sites, which significantly reduce search costs, to find and compare many different offers for the same product. The advancement of technological applications that are present in the digitalized world gives a convenient platform to buy an enlarged set of products and services from more vendors at presumably better prices. In addition, electronic markets allow consumers to shop at any time from anywhere, avoiding the problem of opening hours, distance to shop, or availability of items. In this platform, sellers efficiently transfer relevant product information to potential buyers, which reduces their search costs. Moreover, firms can use digital technologies to increase product differentiation and soften price competition; differentiate themselves by superior interfaces concerning competitors, and create switching costs. Furthermore, electronic-mediated transactions offer new ways to gauge customer preferences more truthfully. Thus, online shopping offers opportunities for targeted advertising, personalized marketing, product customization, and price discrimination.

Perceived Product Expectation versus Reality

Online shopping creates captivating images and graphics of the products that are being displayed in the virtual world. Usually, product appeal is the most common way of enticing shoppers to buy products displayed online. The appealing color of the product is one of the factors why shoppers tend to shop online. On the other hand, products look and designs are the factors that shoppers consider in purchasing decisions. In this way, shoppers expect a lot from the products posted online. They do a pre-evaluation phase where constant product reviews are done among different shoppers who give comments on the product received. Despite the product reviews, there are still instances that the product specifications, designs, and colors do not conform with the actual product that the customers receive. Hence, the expectation may contradict the actual. Below are some of the statements of the participants.

“Frustration is one of the challenging issues that I encountered in online shopping since the item that I purchased did not meet my expectations. In my experience, I bought a pair of shoes, and I assumed that the size posted is considered to be the actual size that I am going to receive. But then, when I received the item, it turned out that it was not the size that I ordered.” (P1)

“The expectation versus reality is another thing to be considered in the challenges that I had encountered. I think this is the most common experience that customers online experience. The photos of the product posted online seemed to be very captivating since some used exaggerated images to enhance the physical look of the product-- but in the actual product, deception is there. It is sad to note that a product does not meet what you expect.” (P2)

“One of the challenges that I had encountered in online shopping becoming a victim of a scam. As I recalled, I had an experience with the shoes that I bought online; I expected that the size I perceived will be the exact size that I will receive I found it frustrating since it was not as I expected it to be. P7)

Based on the responses given by the participants, one of the challenges that online shopping can give to the shoppers will be “product expectation versus reality.” Participant 1 highlighted in her response that it is considered to be the downturn part of the shoppers online whenever the product seen online is not the accurate product that is received. The participant

discussed that she experienced the mismatched size of the item for footwear. The shoppers were not given assurance of the products online. In addition, Participant 2 stressed out that products online tend to become deceptive by nature since most of the products posted have captivating images and graphics, including color, which seems to attract the visual senses of the shoppers. In that way, shoppers will select the item, especially those with limited slots. It would compel them to make an order immediately. More so, Participant 7 cited that the expectation for a particular item is always at the mindset among shoppers considering products posted online are captivating because of their elegant look and style. But because of enhanced megapixels of the gadgets used by some sellers, the products seemed to become more captivating than the actual ones. In that way, it may lead to frustration and dissatisfaction. The participant also added that because of her experience concerning the footwear she bought online, she became more careful in buying items through reading product reviews.

Based on the finding stipulated, Floriano (2011) supported the perceived expectations versus reality, which is one of the issues in the morality of advertising. Accordingly, deception can occur not only through sentences or propositions but also through images, individual phrases, or through other combinations of items that can confuse the customers’ eyes and minds. The pictures displayed in the actual product typically do not look the same as the contents of the item. The image is said to be deceptive.

Customer expectations can affect customer perceptions of the product categories from the perspective of consumerism. High standards for product features and performance, therefore, seem to generate higher ratings for the product to a certain point, at least initially, depending on the product and its importance to the customer.

Poor Assurance of Product Quality

Product quality is always at the top of the customers’ mindset in online shopping because customers want to be satisfied and seek the reliability of the products they intend to buy. In this vein, product quality is the standard of product or service excellence. Based on the responses given by the participants, they stressed product quality. It should be carefully observed and manifested among online sellers that product quality is always their top priority to let their customers be more engaged for the

succeeding purchase. Below are some of the responses given by the participants, which cited the problem of poor assurance of product quality.

“I think the most challenging part in online shopping is that you have to be realistic and become practical in choosing the products online since not all products displayed online have the quality. Some of the items are defective which would lead you to frustration since you purchase the defective items.” (P1)

“Among the challenges that I have encountered in online shopping were product usefulness and the compatibility of the product features do not conform with what is being specified.” (P5)

“Product quality assurance is another issue in online shopping since some of the items displayed are imitated from the original.” (P6)

“The quality assurance is another issue in online shopping since not all products are original because some of them are mere imitation.” (P7)

Based on the responses mentioned by the participants, Participant 1 cited that the quality of the products purchased online does not usually give quality assurance since there are instances and possibilities that customers can have defective products received. Sellers might not give quality assurance since they displayed products online, which are elegant and attract the attention of the shoppers. Also, Participant 5 cited that usually, the lack of product quality assurance is one of the challenges encountered by shoppers in a way that the specifications set by the product do not conform with what is being expected. In this experience, Participant 5 cited that standards are being set by some of the customers in which they always find the compatibility features of a product when they will use. Moreover, Participants 6 and 7 stressed out the usual thing why quality assurance is not achieved is because sellers display original products online but deliver imitated brands or styles to the customers. Hence, dissatisfaction happens.

In line with the finding, the study of Liu and Ling (2013) emphasized the concept of product quality. Usually, deceptive products are posted online to get the interest of the general consumers. Customers cannot touch or feel the product quality, but they get satisfied in different ways like the attributes or product, convenience, or shopping factors, or even technology factors which are

concerns for product security. Consumers feel relieved and satisfied after receiving the item they intend to purchase. Quality is the intrinsic property of an item. Thus, product quality should be enhanced to create customer satisfaction (Susanti, 2013).

From the perspective of total quality management, quality standards are designed to ensure that companies meet the customers' minimum requirements, as it becomes an integral part of almost every industry. Expectations are set permanently. Thus, several companies are coping with quality management definitions or seeing them as complex.

Decreased Instant satisfaction

Customers always look forward to having the product on hand immediately as what is promised to be delivered on the scheduled date of delivery. In this theme, when customers are sent out with a notice that the product will be delivered on a specified date, they already have the presumption that the product will arrive on the expected date after placement of the orders online. However, one can use the product instantly if bought from a physical store, which can be a satisfying factor. In contrast, online shopping requires patience to wait for the item to arrive, which will range from 3-6 days or even more, which can diminish the satisfaction level and excitement of the customers. Cited below are some of the responses given by the participants, related to decreased instant satisfaction due to the delayed delivery of products.

“As far as I can recall with my experience in online shopping, I encountered time frame discrepancy for product delivery. There were instances that the delivery of the products ordered is already delayed from what is being assured in the expected date of arrival.” (P3)

“One of the experiences I had encountered in online shopping is delayed delivery of products. Based on my experience, I ordered a Bluetooth speaker. It was approved immediately. A day after, I received notification that it will be delivered within 3-4 days, but then it lasted for about three weeks before I received the product. I expected that it would not be delivered at all since it is already beyond the expected date of delivery. It was frustrating on my part since it arrived on the time that was beyond the time frame stipulated.” (P8)

Based on the responses mentioned by the participants, Participant 3 cited a discrepancy in product delivery with what was being promised to her about the delivery

of the item. In this case, the promising statement from the seller did not conform with what she expected that the product would arrive. Moreover, Participant 8 cited that the delivery of her item was delayed for a week. It led her to frustration and decreased their excitement and satisfaction, especially since the budget she allocated was already spent on another item.

Peng & Lu (2017) cited that in quality and performance excellence, delayed delivery of products ordered by the customer leads to customer dissatisfaction. Customers look for suppliers of an item who can meet or fulfill what has been promised. Through this, customer loyalty will be achieved. If the suppliers hold to what they promised, they can motivate customers to buy repeatedly or even pay more for the item ordered. Moreover, Bielen and Demoulin (2007) have emphasized that time is significant in providing goods and services to customers, as developing customer loyalty is much more important than just simply satisfying them. He further added that waiting time satisfaction is not only a service satisfaction determinant, but it also moderates the satisfaction-loyalty relationship.

From the customer behavior perspective, customers do not want to wait for a longer period after placing an order or an item. The importance of adequate levels of service quality of delivery specifies the notions of effective customer care and relationship marketing that can be applied to all marketers and products, whether physical or service products and markets. Thus, service quality should be specified accurately by the sellers to ensure customer satisfaction.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Online shopping has recently expanded in recent times as customers find it as a good outlet in making a comparison of products instantly without visiting the physical store outlets. Ideally, it creates ease and fast transaction since, with just one click of the finger, one can directly place an order via virtual setup, which makes a hassle-free activity among online shoppers. The existence of online shops tends to create different experiences among users who find the convenience of doing shopping that can save their time and effort in going to physical stores. On the other hand, despite its convenience, online shopping offered negative experiences among shoppers like their expectations of the items are not met. College shoppers feel frustrated with the actual product received.

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the researcher recommends that online sellers should avoid using captivating images and graphics of the products that are being displayed in the virtual world to avoid deception. Aside from that, sellers should assure product quality to ensure customer satisfaction while creating constant communication with the buyer to create customer loyalty. On the other hand, online buyers should become more cautious in placing the orders through conducting product reviews and referrals before making a purchase. In this way, dissatisfaction will be avoided. It is recommended that a further study be conducted to include professionals to generate large market segments who are more engaged in online shopping activity. It is recommended that further study be conducted to include professionals, and forewarn online shoppers to be extra careful in considering online shops and product reviews to avoid negative experiences.

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