Ecommerce's Effects on Consumer Behavior and Marketing

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science
University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

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Spring, 2020

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received
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With consumers increasingly opting to shop online rather than take a trip to a brick and mortar store, the rise of ecommerce platforms introduces a plethora of new ways, namely in software, that businesses utilize to influence consumers. For example, the exchange that ecommerce platforms have with user data hosting platforms like social networking sites and search engines provides businesses an unprecedented amount of knowledge on their potential consumers. Consumer knowledge determine the preferences and demographic of a user and thereby which particular advertisements a user might see. This attrition in self-determination in shopping demonstrates clearly how technology is determining how consumers shop and what they buy. Many consumers however are weary of the fact that their browsing histories and other online information are being tracked to form targeted advertisements, which presents the challenge for advertisers to avoid seeming like they are stalking their consumers like prey online.

The rise of ecommerce platforms opens the void for the social aspects of shopping such as interacting with a store clerk for advice and seeing what attracts other shoppers. Ecommerce platforms have responded to the demand to fill this void by implementing social tools like recommendation systems and chat boxes with online clerks. However even with these social tools, some consumers still find brick and mortar stores more endearing. Exploring how ecommerce is tackling this problem may also answer the larger question as to what exactly attracts and deters consumers. Ultimately, technological determinism is presented in how ecommerce is influencing both how ecommerce platforms market and the way consumers shop.

Research Question and Methods

How has the rise of ecommerce impacted consumer behavior? This question will be answered by exploring papers consumer feelings on online retail and how they have developed over time as a primary source. The secondary source will be in researching consumer pattern shifts through consumer surveys alongside the growth of ecommerce will help clarify emerging consumer preferences and concerns. How has the rise of ecommerce impacted marketing? This question will be answered by exploring the obsoletion of traditional marketing practices like focus groups and ecommerce platforms' attempts to produce more discreet advertisements as opposed to the loud television commercials of yesteryear. Papers highlighting increasing privacy concerns on the utilization of user data by ecommerce platforms will be the secondary source and help connect how evolving consumer expectations are influencing online marketing.

Background Research

Ecommerce has steadily risen over the past 20 years in size and reach. Roughly 270 million Americans are projected to make an online purchase this year, spending a total of $548 billion which is almost 20 percent of overall consumer spending (Richter, 2019). The rise of online shopping opens a window for software to study and influence potential consumers. The application of software in marketing, often goes by the umbrella term of digital marketing (DMI).

One major digital marketing practice involves gathering many users' data in order for ecommerce platforms to more easily identify general consumer patterns. Before the advent of the internet, companies could only read general consumer perceptions through focus groups which were gatherings that involved a discussion facilitated by the company to elicit consumer thoughts

about a chosen topic (Devault 2019). Focus groups by in nature pales in comparison to how much user data can be found online (Sioan 2017). In fact, user data hosting platforms all have the potential to or actively share user data with ecommerce platforms. Many websites are capable to host user data considering that most websites in recent years require account registration for access. User registration forms have the potential to elicit user information by tracking other websites a user has registered and thereby gauging the general interests of a user. Websites often even explicitly survey user opinions on their products and even their user interfaces. Social networking platforms on the other hand, clearly host even more facets of a person beyond just an email address. Social networking platforms, for example, can host explicit interests of a user via posts, comments, likes, and followings.

Another means of studying consumers is found in user traffic and the utilization of cookies. Most websites these days are often equipped with cookies and web beacons which are technologies that enable companies to track visitors' browsing histories even as they exit the company's site. Cookies allows companies to know where customers have been, what they have looked at, and where they go after they have finished browsing the website. Similarly, advertisement emails are often tracked to see whether a recipient has opened the email and what device the recipient was on (Goddard 2019).

The magnitude of information that can be found online about users, demonstrates the obsoletion of focus groups which are incapable of gauging consumer interests as effectively on a large scale. In fact, focus groups may not be effective at all, considering what a 2016 Wall Street Journal article stated, "Focus-group subjects tend to try to please their testers, impress their peers and overestimate their interest in products, making it hard to get a read on what works." However, some say the position of a focus group moderator is still viable. Moderators when

proficient, can ask in depth questions that online surveys may not ask and even understand better human cues a computer would not be able to notice. Of course, artificial intelligence developers would say that this gap between human's ability to discern deeper thoughts of other humans and a computers inability to discern would soon be closed with future advancements (Cutherson 2019).

The demand for a social presence among ecommerce platforms definitely exist. Many ecommerce platforms encourage User-Generated Content (UGC) which is a blanket term for anytime a user may share a product through hashtags or in a post. According to Salesforce, 54% of customers are said to be more likely to trust a fellow consumer over explicit marketing (DMI). With attention spans said to have been reduced to 6 seconds (the same as a goldfish) and many consumers becoming weary they are the targets of numerous ecommerce platforms; marketers are challenged to make their advertisements appear more genuine instead of predatory. In fact, 76% of consumers view UGC as more honest than traditional advertising and suggests that marketers should strive to insert UGC into all phases of the purchase cycle, from discovery to point of purchase of post purchase. 88% of shoppers are said to enjoy experiential interaction with a product before purchasing (Lyons 2018). These challenges for online retail platforms are being tackled with online chat boxes that attempt to imitate real-world store clerks, the addition of video of products (which 81% of consumers say provides more confidence in making purchases), and 3d visualization of products to get a better feel of products in-hand via zooming and spinning for a 360 degree view (DMI).

STS Framework

All the endeavors that ecommerce sites pursue to attract consumers, ultimately leads to an unprecedented attrition of individual's right to informational self-determination. Consumers are

powerless to prevent the unauthorized dissemination of their personal information and excluded from its profitable exchange. One ecommerce specialist begged the question that if consumers' personal information is such a valuable market asset, should they not be entitled to benefit from their asset as well (Yassine 2011)?

Technological determinism clearly exists with how technology is increasingly influencing what consumers online see, think and ultimately what they buy. Even when consumers believe to be above digital marketing ploys, marketing by ecommerce platforms are a step ahead in reaching even brand conversations that happen offline (which is 90%) by providing incentives to consumers that may refer a friend (Lyons 2018).

Social tools that attempt to emulate traditional retail spaces and the development of artificial intelligence to better understand consumers may answer what attracts and deters potential consumers. Also, considering that ecommerce has matured over the last 20 years, customer expectations must have also changed. Modern day customers expect a seamless shopping experience that is personalized to them and expect a social element to purchases as well such as in reviewing capabilities which allows more consumer engagement. Have consumers influenced ecommerce platforms more than the other way around? The answer seems to point that they are both progressing with the influences of each other. Customer expectations are increasing as increased consumer engagement means more informed consumers, pushing companies to raise their standards (Scalefast). At the same time, clearly, ecommerce platforms are influencing consumers what they buy with the likes of subtle online endorsements and personalized advertisements.

Ecommerce's encroachment into user data also brings up the question; how much users value their privacy and whether they would ever exchange their data for personalized

advertisements (which user agreements tend to hide in fine print) (Frik 2018). Thus, leading

ecommerce platforms to find a middle ground between appearing predatory and blindly

advertising without any leads. However, for many consumers, they are unwilling to watch ads

with intrusive experiences at all. Ecommerce platforms have fostered a culture that is wary of

advertisement intrusions, forcing many to install adblockers on their browsers which has grown

to 74 million users (SearchForce 2017).

Ecommerce platforms overall are leading people to spend more time online. Already 56%

of consumers use their mobile phones to research products at their home. Ecommerce platforms

have also afforded consumers easier access to multiple shopping channels which 73% of

shoppers regularly do before making a purchase (Rashid). Easier access to multiple shopping

channels means that companies now have to fight more on prices with competitors. In this way,

the rise of ecommerce's popularity is influencing ecommerce itself.

Technological Determinism on Consumer Behavior and Marketing

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Results and Discussion

The total market share of ecommerce platforms eclipsed brick and mortar sales for the first time in 2019, according to the Commerce Department, making user data now more than ever even more vital to retail companies in obtaining both online traffic and sales. The relationship between ecommerce platforms and user data hosting platforms have evolved from simple soliciting advertisement emails to complex algorithms that can effectively find target consumers and analyze consumer trends. The rise in software has afforded retail companies a larger reach as to the number of consumers they can study as opposed to the limited pool of consumers that are available by focus groups. However, increasing utilization of user data has proven to cause also a setback on making sales as consumers are becoming weary of the predatory practices and the breach in their privacy that comes alongside targeted advertisements. Thus, marketing has become a battle to make their products attractive and discreet at the same time. Finding this middle ground has largely been done by making online shopping more of a social experience whether through social tools implemented on the retail website or the presence of online social influencers.

The term ecommerce predates the internet with Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) in the 1960s that conducted electronic transactions over primitive computer networks (Hussung 2018). Electronic Data Interchange exemplified ecommerce at its purest form which afforded buyers and sellers the extra trip to a physical retail space. With 80% of Americans now shopping online as opposed to 22% in 2000, the decreased popularity in visiting brick and mortar stores have consequently affected the labor market and how the economy functions. If the pace of brick and mortar store closures continue, major retailers could shutter as many as 12,000 stores by the end of 2020 which is doubled that of 2008 the year that marked the Great Recession (Farfan 2019). A sector advisor for retail, Aurelien Duthoit estimates that continued ecommerce penetration could eliminate a half million jobs and 30,000 retail establishments by 2025. The net negative agent ecommerce has become to brick and mortar stores has been called the "retail apocalypse", a moniker to illustrate the end of an American pastime of expansive super malls and video stores. Dozens of traditional large retailers have described in their bankruptcy filings that shoppers have shifted their behavior, reducing mall visits and increasing online shopping. These companies, many of them with sizable debt loads from buyouts by private equity firms, could not adapt in time to evade financial disaster. (Unglesbee 2020). The rise of ecommerce has changed the big-time key players in retail such as in budget shoes from Payless liquidated to make room for Zappos and books from traditional bookstores closing to make room for Amazon. Ultimately, the rise of ecommerce demonstrates the phenomenon of technological determinism not only in how it changed the avenues for which consumers shop but also in how it diminished the cultural elements that came along with shopping in person. Stranger Things season 3 setting in a suburban supermall of yesteryear displays how technology has left some old social places in the past, conjuring feelings of nostalgia. This trend of new technology replacing old technology is

nothing new. The television killed the radio and now ecommerce has killed the super mall, the video store, the book store, and many other brick and mortar focused retail businesses.

Still, some consumers still find physical retail spaces more endearing. Even when bookstores are closing left and right when considering Manhattan as an example that fell from 386 book stores in 1950 to 106 in 2015, bookstores like The Last Bookstore still prosper which can afford a 10,000 square foot space in downtown Los Angeles (Conroy 2019). The Last Bookstore's charm exists in its quirky elements such as the stack of books that form into waves and uniquely themed corner areas. However, beyond the surface of odd book stack formations, the real success comes from the social media presence of the bookstore and the traffic it comes with it.

In order to match trendy stores like The Last Bookstore, ecommerce platforms have been attempting to establish more social influence and make their shopping experiences more personable. One major way this is done is through product discovery on social media which grew from 80% of consumers discovering a product they were interested on social media, up from 58% in 2017. The increase in focus on product discovery reveals how important initial impressions are for retail companies. Apu Gupta, CEO of service that provides ecommerce platforms social influence, notes that a shopper's journey online does not begin with a search but with a scroll. Ecommerce companies realizing this, have made efforts in encroaching on what users already follow online. In fact, 50% of consumers are said to visit a brand's website and 52% of consumers are said to spend more time on a brand's website after seeing an image of a brand's product on their feed (Forte 2019). Brand image leads retail companies to reevaluate the effectiveness of its social marketing on its immediate revenue impact, and consider more of a lasting impact their social marketing can yield. Technological determinism exists in how

investors are becoming more forgiving on ventures that are not initially profitable. The existence

of software-based companies that have never made a profit like Uber and Spotify is proof that

the social element behind a brand alone can carry a company (Laurie 2017). Its hard to say that

ecommerce has been solely responsible for this phenomenon of brand loyalty. However, it is

certain that, ecommerce has made the development process of brand loyalty more of a science

than before with the introduction of mass user data available.

       The combination of user data and ecommerce's endeavors to reach all parts of a user's

screen real estate presents an unprecedented attrition in product self-discovery, posing the

question whether online users should be part of the profitable exchange that occurs between

ecommerce and user data hosting platforms. One obvious solution seems to be that companies

should pay users for their data. However, this proposal is flawed when considering that

"consumers would lose significant shared value in exchange for minimal cash compensation,

higher income individuals would benefit at the expense of the poor, and transaction costs would

increase substantially, further reducing value for consumers and limiting opportunities for

businesses to innovate with data". Although, clearly, compensating users for their data does not

make much sense when considering splitting Google and Facebook's profit in 2017 of 25 billion

euros among 4.6 billion users would only grant users 2.7 euros per year, the real concern of this

large data exchange lies in privacy (Chivot 2019). The debate for user data compensation and the

challenge of keeping user data confidential or at least appearing so, are both problems that rose

with technology increasingly becoming involved in the marketing process. Ecommerce is

definitely fostering a new culture of veteran users weary of the predatory practices that marketers

typically push. 2 million users, in recent years have installed ad blockers to combat bombarding

online advertisements which digital publishers have said lost an estimated $22 million in 2015 to (Payoneer 2016).

In order to circumvent this problem, ecommerce is resorting back to an age-old marketing practice of endorsements. Unlike the loud commercial televisions of the past with athletes and celebrities smiling at a camera holding a product, ecommerce platforms today are increasingly becoming more invested in micro-influencers, a group with less but more dedicated followers than traditional celebrities. In fact, 26% of consumers have admitted a micro-influencer has helped them discover a product in the past 3 months, compared to 20% for celebrities and 22% for friends (Forte 2019). Consequently, a larger focus on these micro-influencers presents how technology is determining where endorsement checks are going to and an increasing demand for micro-influencers. The demand for micro-influencers is apparent given the information that on average, consumers follow 10 micro-influencers. In the past, brands approached endorsements by aggressively telling consumers what to do. Lance Armstrong for instance, was decorated in all Nike gear and equipment in his last Tour de France race, telling cycling enthusiasts perhaps at the time that Nike was the premier company to buy their gear from. However, it was common knowledge that an athlete like Lance Armstrong would be paid millions of dollars by Nike, rendering his endorsement less authentic than what an impartial cycling enthusiast on YouTube may afford. In fact, 48% of consumers are said to trust a brand's claims more when the endorsement is authentic. Thus, ecommerce platforms are faced with promoting shoppers from talking about their products, whether it be through hashtags or product review videos. In sponsoring micro-influencers, ecommerce platforms are determining what consumers see when researching products which 80% of consumers are said to do before making a purchase (Forte

2019). The development of an artificial sense of product self-discovery is unprecedented,

fostering a culture catering more towards user discussion than outright celebrity endorsements.

Retrieving user data for this development, of course, is crucial in discovering user

patterns, trends, and preferences. In the past, consumer data was retrieved from focus groups

which were selected groups to symbolize a targeted consumer demographic that would convey

opinions or sometimes merely be monitored when using a certain product. Whereas focus groups

afforded marketing teams a finite pool of people to study, big data has allowed ecommerce

platforms to tap into a limitless supply of user data. With the internet being able to capture and

catalogue every click a user makes, this unprecedented reach in consumer knowledge, has made

it easier for platforms like Amazon to see what purchases a user may want to buy next and

determine what advertisements a user may see (Stromber 2019). The relationship with big data

and looming obsoletion of focus groups, not only marks a shift in marketing approaches, but also

how marketers perceive their target consumers. Whereas, managing focus groups is a skill of

discerning human expressions, nuances, and interpreting opinions, the utilization of big data only

requires more user data to get better, naturally as all machine learning systems do. Therefore,

modern marketers are increasingly behaving like software engineers. The shift in roles for

marketers directly demonstrates technological determinism.

Limitations in research existed, largely because ecommerce has not definitively killed the

brick and mortar space. Clearly, some physical retail spaces like the Last Book Store in Los

Angeles present cases where the claims about the future of retail are no so black and white. The

retail apocalypse seems to be an overstatement when one examines how 66% of men and 59% of

women still make clothing purchases in store (Petro 2019). As a result, the future of the retail

space remains to be a deliberation game. Another limitation in the research process was found in

evaluating the level of weariness and awareness users had on the predatory practices managed by ecommerce platforms. Although this seemed to be a well acknowledge sentiment among modern users, finding statistics to support this claim was proven to be difficult. In retrospect, conducting an independent survey would have been best in producing those numbers.

The psychology behind what makes authenticity so appealing to consumers and how ecommerce platforms could fabricate authenticity could have been further explored, but it was left out due to being out of scope from the research questions. Discussion concerning the economic ramifications of ecommerce could have been further investigated. For instance, internet shopping allows users to see millions of different ecommerce platforms at the disposal of their internet connecting devices. The economics of how ecommerce has led retail to cut each other in prices in the midst of this new found competition presented, however, a rabbit hole that left the gamut of answering how ecommerce had shaped society.

Conclusion

The rise of ecommerce has affected consumer behavior, by changing the avenues at which they shop, the inspirations they look to when making purchases, expectations they have of retail, and the trust they have on social media platforms. The rise of ecommerce has affected marketing, by introducing big data, a shift in ideal endorsement candidates, a focus more on product discovery, and the pending obsoletion of focus groups. The significance of these findings is apparent in how they have remodeled the retail shopping experience. The rise of ecommerce demonstrates how technology is increasingly becoming part of daily living as it encroaches on the role of marketers and fostering a more alert consumer base.

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