

# Internet Shopping: A Study Based On Hedonic Value and Flow Theory

Pui-Lai To, E-Ping Sung

**Abstract**—With the flourishing development of online shopping, an increasing number of customers see online shopping as an entertaining experience. Because the online consumer has a double identity as a shopper and an Internet user, online shopping should offer hedonic values of shopping and Internet usage. The purpose of this study is to investigate hedonic online shopping motivations from the perspectives of traditional hedonic value and flow theory.

The study adopted a focus group interview method, including two online and two offline interviews. Four focus groups of shoppers consisted of online professionals, online college students, offline professionals and offline college students. The results of the study indicate that traditional hedonic values and dimensions of flow theory exist in the online shopping environment. The study indicated that online shoppers seem to appreciate being able to learn things and grow to become competitive achievers online. Comparisons of online hedonic motivations between groups are conducted. This study serves as a basis for the future growth of Internet marketing.

**Keywords**—Flow theory, hedonic motivation, internet shopping.

## I. INTRODUCTION

ALLOWING consumers to enjoy the shopping process has gradually become a critical competitive tool for retailers [1]. Some studies indicate that factors other than procuring products are critical to Internet shopping [2]. Many retailers realize the importance of providing entertainment while shopping [1]. Customers increasingly see shopping as a means to seek happiness, fantasy, sensual excitement and enjoyable experiences in both the offline and online environment. Online shopping would be increased if online retailers could create an interactive and entertaining shopping environment to satisfy the emotional needs of shoppers. Providing hedonic shopping elements can increase purchases and enhance customer relationships with online retailers. On the other hand, Hoffman and Novak [3] suggest that Internet users may appear in a state of flow while interacting with technology. During the state of flow, users are completely absorbed in Internet interaction and relatively oblivious to external stimuli. Dimensions of flow experiences, such as intense concentration, heightened enjoyment, curiosity, telepresence and a sense of control, can encourage browsing and surfing behavior. Since online shoppers play the dual roles of traditional shoppers and Internet users, traditional hedonic shopping motivations and dimensions of flow exist in the online shopping environment. This study

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explores the hedonic motivations for online shopping from the perspectives of hedonic motivations and flow theory. Through an extensive exploration of previous research and focus group interviews, this study provides a further understanding of hedonic motivations for online shopping and bestows new meanings to online hedonic values.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Hedonic Shopping Motivations

Tauber [4] first raised the concept of non-functional shopping motives. Non-functional shopping motives include both personal and social motives. Both of these motives focus on satisfying psychological and hedonic demands while shopping. Westbrook and Black [5] confirm the existence of distinct shopping motivations. Among the hedonic motivations derived from shopping were: choosing presents for others to fulfill one's familial or peer role (role); receiving novel information at the storefront (learning trends); seeking the pleasure of bargaining through negotiations with sellers (pleasure of bargaining); seeking sensory stimuli from the retail environment (stimulation); and enjoying the sense of superiority when receiving service from a seller (status). Several other hedonic shopping motivations suggested by Arnold and Reynolds [1] are: shopping for the sheer excitement and adventure of the shopping trip (adventure); shopping as a special treat to oneself (self-gratification); and shopping as an opportunity to socialize (social).

Wolfenbarger and Gilly [6] believe that there exist two unique motivations regarding online shopping: the experiential (for fun) and goal-orientation (for efficiency). Experiential-oriented shoppers receive more enjoyment from the "thrill of the hunt" than the actual acquisition of products. Parsons [7] further discusses non-functional motives for online shopping. One of the non-functional motives is diversion, which means that online shopping enables consumers to diverge from the routine of daily life; and thus online shopping represents a form of recreation. This study categorizes the online hedonic shopping motivations from the previous researchers as follows: social, role, self-gratification, learning trends, pleasure of bargaining, stimulation, diversion, status, and adventure.

### B. The Theory of Flow

Flow is defined as the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement. When people are in flow, they shift into a common mode of experience when they become absorbed in their activity. This mode is characterized by a narrowing of the focus of awareness, so that irrelevant perceptions and thoughts are filtered out by loss of

self-consciousness, by responsiveness to clear goals and unambiguous feedback, and by a sense of control over the environment [8]. Hoffman and Novak [9] believe that Internet users will experience a state of flow while browsing. Dimensions of flow include control, concentration, curiosity, enjoyment and telepresence. The state of concentration however, might not trigger a sense of enjoyment for online shoppers. Four out of the five flow components, namely, control, curiosity, enjoyment and telepresence, which might have hedonic values to shoppers are included in this research.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Design

This study adopts the focus group interview method, including two online and two offline focus groups. The subjects of the focus groups are college students and professionals, who are likely to be technology savvy and thus early adopters of online shopping. Four focus groups of shoppers were undertaken, including online professional, online students, offline professional and offline students.

Online focus group methodology has the advantage of obtaining individual as well as group reactions while minimizing the opportunity for any individuals to dominate others in the group. With hidden identity, the subjects tend to be direct and outspoken. Subjects located in geographically diverse areas can participate in the same interview. The online qualitative research is well suited for Internet savvy subjects. On the other hand, offline focus group methodology offers the advantage of face to face communication and hence, better interaction. Researchers can observe the subjects closely and stimulate better group discussion. Online and offline focus group methods have different and complementary advantages.

Each focus group is composed of 8 to 10 participants and a total of 36 people were interviewed. Each interview lasted around two hours. All participants had prior online shopping experience. Participants were recruited through publicly posted messages on the major shopping forums and bulletin boards of major universities. As an incentive, all participants were given a gift certificate worth approximately US\$15.

#### B. Research Procedures

A content analysis coupled with Nudist computer software was used to analyze the data. The research procedures can be divided into three stages. First, the operational definitions of online hedonic shopping motivations were proposed. Nine hedonic shopping motivations, namely social, role, self-gratification, learning trends, pleasure of bargaining, stimulation, diversion, status and adventure and four dimensions of flow, control, curiosity, enjoyment and telepresence, are included in the study. Since the concepts of status and control, and the concepts of adventure and curiosity are alike, the four are combined as two motivations. A total of eleven hedonic online shopping motivations are summarized from previous studies.

Second, the transcripts of the interview were analyzed. Data units were organized into a category describing their respective

hedonic motivation. Any data units that could not be categorized would be temporarily labeled in the category of "others" for further assessment and discussion. This process was repeated until all data units had been categorized. Two newly found hedonic motivations, privacy and online shopping achievement, were discovered during the process. The operational definitions of these motivations are defined in the study. A total of thirteen hedonic motivations are provided.

Third, the list of operational definitions and the data units were given to two researchers for categorization, comparison and minimization of the possibility of bias or mis-categorization caused by subjectivity. Among the 687 data units, 593 units remained in the same categories. A second round categorization was conducted for the other 94 units. After discussion, sixty-eight out of the 94 units were re-categorized with consensus. The remaining 26 units were categorized after thorough discussion with a third researcher. The results of the study should be valid and reliable given the rigorous checking procedure.

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The study has presented thirteen hedonic motivations for online shopping derived from the content analysis of the respondents' statements. Motivations related to pleasure only are social, role, self-gratification, learning trends, pleasure of bargaining, stimulation and diversion; related to flow only are enjoyment and telepresence; related to both hedonism and flow include status/control, and adventure/curiosity. Two newly found motivations, privacy and online shopping achievement, are also presented.

### V. THE RESULTS

#### A. The Relative Importance of Hedonic Motivations

Summarizing the online hedonic motivations discussed by the focus groups, the results indicate that the most frequently mentioned hedonic motivations are pleasure of bargaining, privacy, social, learning trends and online shopping achievement accordingly. It appears that consumers fully enjoy having the choice to interact with someone (pleasure of bargaining and social) or not interact with anyone (privacy) on the Internet. Consumers seem to appreciate being able to learn things (learning trends) and hope to be competitive achievers online (online shopping achievement). Telepresence, status/control and role, on the other hand, are apparently considered to be insignificant in terms of hedonic values. The results imply that shopping websites nowadays lack these hedonic values.

#### B. Hedonic Motivations for Different Groups of Online Shoppers

Distributed comparisons of online hedonic motivations based on gender, occupation and interview channel were conducted in the research. Male and female shoppers have different perceptions in terms of online hedonic motivations. While male shoppers have stronger adventure/curiosity motivation, female shoppers are strongly motivated by all other hedonic aspects.

The results imply that female shoppers tend to emphasize the nonfunctional and emotional needs satisfied during shopping.

Differing hedonic motivations between professional and college-student shoppers are compared in the research. Student-shoppers seem to enjoy online shopping more than the professional participants. Being younger and having more free time may be the reasons student-shoppers enjoy the hedonic values of online shopping. Student-shoppers are usually price-sensitive and thus have special interests in bargaining (pleasure of bargaining) and acquiring value products (online shopping achievement).

Online and offline participants have different views in terms of online hedonic motivations. Online participants enjoy online shopping more than offline participants. People who are more receptive to online interviews probably enjoy the pleasure of online shopping. Among all the hedonic motivations, online participants highly value the choice of interacting with (social) or not interacting with someone (privacy) on the Internet. Browsing shopping websites without interference and sharing online shopping experiences with friends are two major motivations online participants value.

## VI. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Previous studies indicate that only a minority of online shoppers are not goal-oriented and are looking for online experience. However, as younger surfers who have grown up on the net become fully-fledged shoppers, hedonic values of online shopping are becoming desirable. Increased hedonic values associated with shopping experiences may lead to a more positive frame of mind, greater shopping satisfaction, and a higher likelihood of impulse purchasing behavior. Online retailers should emphasize hedonic values to encourage experiential shopping behavior.

The study shows that online shoppers play the dual roles of traditional shoppers and Internet users. Traditional hedonic shopping values and state of flow exist in the online shopping environment. The study finds that consumers can acquire some of the enjoyment of physical shopping in an online shopping environment. Traditional hedonic shopping motivations, i.e. social, role, self-gratification, learning trends, pleasure of bargaining, stimulation, diversion, status and adventure exist in both the physical and virtual shopping environment. The difference is that certain hedonic motivations emphasized in physical shopping may not be significant in the online environment. A sense of superiority is less prominent since human attention is removed in the online shopping environment. The visual stimulation offered by online retailers is less compelling than the multi-sensory stimulation promised by physical retailers.

The study also finds that some aspects of flow do stimulate online hedonic values. Shoppers sense the states of control, curiosity, enjoyment and telepresence during the course of online shopping. However, telepresence offered by online retailers is far less compelling than the multi-dimensional presence provided by physical retailers. Only high unit-price products that offer virtual reality video clips provide telepresence. As faster technology and broadband appliances

become a mainstream reality, the potential for telepresence to play a more ubiquitous role in the online shopping environment looks increasingly promising.

Hedonic motivations unique to online shopping are also identified in the study. Shoppers highly value the personal needs of privacy and online shopping achievement. Online shoppers are able to enjoy a hassle-free shopping environment and discreetly satisfy needs without being noticed. Online shoppers also enjoy the process of acquiring unique, limited or value products on the Internet. Having the ability to find value products helps satisfy self-esteem.

Previous studies support the differential aspects of hedonic and utilitarian motivations for online shopping [10]. Utilitarian values are proved to generate utilitarian shopping motivations, and hedonic values generate hedonic motivations. However, the study finds that utilitarian values could bring pleasure and joy to the consumers. Getting bargain or limited products (utilitarian shopping values) could trigger the pleasure of bargain and online shopping achievement (hedonic motivation). This result differs from that of the past in which the concepts of utilitarian and hedonic shopping are distinct and unrelated. Perhaps some of the utilitarian shopping values may stimulate hedonic as well as utilitarian shopping motivations to consumers.

The study discovers that student shoppers, female shoppers and shoppers prone to Internet-communication generally appreciate the pleasure of online shopping more than others. Thus, providing multiple entertaining values or facilities to attract customers of these categories is essential for shopping websites. Online retailers may need to develop respective marketing strategies for different target groups to improve customer satisfaction.

Perhaps the greatest implication of the research lies not with the individual motivations that have been shown to be apparent in online shopping, but with the general concept of hedonic motivations for online shopping. Physical shopping may compete with online shopping on human contact, multi-sensory stimulation and the feelings of being presence. However, online shopping can outperform physical shopping in other areas. Online shoppers fully enjoy being given the choice to interact with someone or not interact with anyone while shopping. The ability of online shopping to cater to social experiences on online communities offers an advantage for those unable or unwilling to venture out to physical locations. Online shoppers could get social support by accessing an online community sharing similar interests. On the other hand, the anonymity of online shopping provides shoppers an opportunity to enjoy a quiet and hassle-free shopping environment. Online shoppers could gain privacy without worrying about interference and others' opinions.

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