College students' online buying behavior: a focus group study

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Abstract: *This study is aimed to explore the factors influencing the college students, to purchase products and services from the online retail stores. Qualitative research using the focus group methodology was used in this exploratory research. Content analysis method was used to analyse the transcribed data. The data analysis procedure resulted in six factors namely (i) Low Prices; (ii) Variety; (iii) Time Consciousness; (iv) Convenience; (v) Promotions and (vi) Comparison; which influenced the college students to shop from the internet stores. Overall, the results of this study provides online retailers and marketers with a better understanding of college students' online retail buying behavior which will help them to design their marketing strategies to enable them to give enough competitive advantage. This study contributes to the existing research in the area of online retail buying behavior in India.*
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I.   Introduction

Owing to the rapid expansion of e-commerce in India majorly driven by increased internet penetration, online retail market has enormous potential. Recent statistics show that India's e-commerce market was worth about $3.8 billion in 2009 and is expected to touch whopping $38 billion mark by 2016 (ASSOCHAM India, 2016). The college going students' also referred as youth, constitutes for 29% of the active internet users (IAMAI and IMRB, 2013) and these students which largely fall under 18-25 years of age group has been the fastest growing segment online (ASSOCHAM India, 2016). Earlier researches have highlighted the importance of targeting the youth segment because of their tech-savvy embracing of anything wired (Lester et al., 2005). Also, college students have been categorized as an attractive market segment by Khare and Rakesh (2011), and they will determine the future of the online market in India was mentioned by Rishi (2008). Considering the importance of college students in context to the online retail market in India the aim of this study was to explore the factors that influence the college students to purchase products and services from the online retail stores. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the existing literature on online retail buying behavior in India.

II.   Previous Research

Past studies have found that there are many determinants by which the college students are influenced to shop from the online retail stores. The chances of shopping online were influenced by peers, authorities, personal perceptions, past purchasing behaviors, demographics and security concerns (Brooke and Dietram 2002). In other studies influencing factors were convenience (Comegys and Brennan, 2003; Lester et al., 2005); easier, saves time, has better prices, has online product reviews and featured sales item pages (Comegys and Brennan, 2003); speed of retrieving information, price comparison, perceived accuracy of information and internet security (Lighter et al., 2002). Also competitive prices, anytime shopping, compare prices were influencers of internet purchase according to Lester et al. (2005). According to Rajamma and Neeley (2005), the features influencing the online shopping were the browsing facilities, information gathering and comparing offerings.

In the study of the youth population in India, Rishi (2008) highlights the important online retail shopping factors as clarity, scope, convenience, reliability and accessibility whereas Jadhav and Khanna (2016) identifies variety, low prices, trust, promotions, time consciousness, comparison, attitude, convenience, perceived ease of use and customer service as important factors influencing online shopping behavior. As observed, the number of factors involved in context to college students' online retail buying behavior is large and still emerging; most of the researchers are focusing on few factors at a time in their studies.

III.   Objective Of The Study

The specific objective of the study was to explore the factors that motivated the college students to buy products and services from the online retail stores.

IV. Methodology

Qualitative research methodology involving focus group discussion was used in this exploratory research. The main advantage of focus group discussion is that it helps in identifying the hidden motives of the targeted participants and also it offers preliminary ideas for the research. As the target participants are student online buyers in this research, the selection criteria for the focus group participants was "the participating college student should have purchased a product or a service at least once in the past six months from any online store." Convenience sampling technique was used to get the required participants. Total four focus group discussions were conducted in the city of Mumbai. Mumbai (earlier known as Bombay) the capital city of the Indian state of Maharashtra, was selected as the research location as it has more internet users than any other city in the country according to data released by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2013).

A background of the topic and the purpose of the focus group discussion were briefed to the participants including the video recording process. A consent form was signed by all the participants before beginning of each focus group discussion. A discussion guide was used by the first author who moderated each focus group discussion. Each focus group discussion varied from 60 to 90 minutes duration. All focus group discussions were video recorded for later analysis.

The data analysis consisted of understanding and interpretation of the transcriptions created from the video recordings of focus group discussions. The data or the patterns emerging from all the focus group discussions were grouped together to form the main factors, which are presented in the findings.

V. FINDINGS

Findings are arranged starting with the participants profile followed by the factors emerging from the focus group discussions.

Participants Profile: As presented in Table 1, total 41 college students participated in four focus group discussions out of which 61% were male respondents. 76% of students had completed their graduation and are doing post-graduation. 46% of the students were from the age-group 21-23 years followed by 27% from the age-group 24-26 years. First group consisted of all the male college students who were graduates; second group had all female graduates. The third group consisted of both male and female graduates. And the fourth group had both male and female students from undergraduates.

Table 1: Participants Profile

		Focus Group Number				Total Students	Percentage
		1	2	3	4	N = 41	
Gender	Male	12	0	8	5	25	60.98%
	Female	0	8	3	5	16	39.02%
Education	Under Graduate	0	0	0	10	10	24.39%
	Graduate	12	8	11	0	31	75.61%
Age-Group	Below 21 years	0	0	0	10	10	24.39%
	21 - 23 years	6	6	7	0	19	46.34%
	24 - 26 years	6	2	3	0	11	26.83%
	Above 26 years	0	0	1	0	1	2.44%

Factors influencing online retail buying behavior: The data analysis procedure resulted in six factors which influence the college students' online retail buying behavior. The factors are (i) Low Prices; (ii) Variety; (iii) Time Consciousness; (iv) Convenience; (v) Promotions and (vi) Comparison.

i) Low Prices:

Low prices refer to goods sold by the retailers on less prices compared to its original selling price. To attract maximum customers many online retailers offer their products and services on low prices. In focus group discussions, low prices, price differentiation on different sites were some of the reasons quoted by the college students as one of the most encouraging factor to shop from the online stores. Some of the quotes stated by the students in support of low prices are:

"Their price factor, low rates motivates me. No need of roaming in the shops."
   "Money saving"
   "Cheap"
   "Reasonable prices"

"Rates are much cheaper"

ii) Variety:

Variety refers to the choice offered by the online retailers in terms of brands or products or models or service related options or all. Wide variety of products, variety of payment options, all brands under one roof, more options at the same time are some of the reasons mentioned by students to shop from online store. Quotes in support of variety are:

"Wide variety of products, access to different variety, large variety"
"I find it more suitable to browse through various products at once."
"Whole range of the selected product, better choices"
"All brands under one roof, one stop shop, multibrands"
"Different types of products, large number of products to choose from"

iii) Time Consciousness:

Time consciousness in context to online retail shopping refers to spending minimum time for the shopping activity vis-à-vis offline retail stores. Also anytime shopping is another attractive feature offered by online retail stores. The students were observed to be time conscious so that they could spend more time in other activities. Quotes favoring time consciousness are:

"I can get the approximate delivery time or can go for one day paid delivery option. If I get to know about the party or function I have to go to in a day or two, I would definitely choose online shopping because I can't compromise with my schedule."
"You can shop when you are very busy. Ease of shopping, buy any time, saves time for us."
"Saves traffic time hence can spend more time in other leisure activities."
"Anytime shopping, 24 X 7 shopping, buying at preferable time."

iv) Convenience:

Convenience in online shopping refers to shopping from anywhere, any place. An online retail store allows the customers to shop from any remote location. Many students preferred online shopping due to convenience of buying from anywhere, any place shopping, convenient payment options, less effort, easy access. Some quotes in favor of convenience:

"It is convenient and helpful in booking cinema ticket during rush hours."
"Convenience of buying from anywhere"
"Any place shopping"
"Convenient payment options"

v) Promotions:

Aimed to encourage the purchase of products, promotions designed by the online retailers and marketers include price based offers or non-price based offers. Students were observed to be motivated by various offers, replacement offers, best offers, attractive offers special offers to shop from internet stores under the factor promotions:

"I feel there are more attractive offers as it is directly from the factory dealers"
"Various offers, attractive offers, variety of offers, special offers"
"Replacement offers. Exchange offers, payback offers, cash back offers, sales offers"
"Best offers, good deals, smart deals"

vi) Comparison:

Comparison in context to online shopping refers to assessing the prices of goods, promotions of goods and assessing the goods on the same or different internet stores. Comparison of products, prices, deals is also been done by college students and is one of the influencing reasons to shop from the internet store under factor comparison:

"Comparing prices, comparing deals"
"Easily compare on various sites, comparability"
"Comparison of products, easy comparison of products"
"Comparison of different products on different websites"

VI.   Conclusion

This study examined the online retail buying behavior of the college students from qualitative perspective using the focus group study. This study was aimed to explore the factors influencing the college students, to purchase products and services from the online retail stores. Data analysis of this focus group study

resulted in six factors namely Low Prices, Variety, Promotions, Comparison, Time Consciousness and Convenience. It was found that, the college students preferred to shop from the online retail stores over brick and mortar stores due to time consciousness and convenience. Further they felt a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment when they did their purchase from online retail stores by checking low prices, variety, promotions and comparisons on different internet stores.

Due to the enormous potential of online retail market in India it is expected that this market will become highly competitive. Under such situation research aimed in understanding the factors influencing the customers' online retail buying behavior is very important for the success of online retail market. Moreover, youth segment which is the fastest growing segment online is important to online retailers and marketers not only because it is lucrative, but also because many consumption patterns and brand loyalty followed throughout life are formed during this stage (Loudon, and Bitta, 2002). Therefore with this estimated highly competitive scenario in Indian online retail market and importance of youth segment in context to online retail buying behavior, it is of utmost importance to study the online retail buying behavior for the benefit of the online retailers, marketers as well as the academic researchers. Overall, the results of this study provides online retailers and marketers with a better understanding of college students' online retail buying behavior which will help them to design their marketing strategies to enable them to give enough competitive advantage. This study contributes to the existing research in the area of online retail buying behavior in India.

The current study is important to the online retailers and the marketers because of its vital insights. However there are limitations to this study. Firstly this study was focused on the college students of Mumbai city, in India. Therefore further studies on college students' online retail buying behavior can be conducted in different cities of India to understand the differences in the consumer behavior in online retail context. Secondly, this study provides a qualitative perspective to understand the college students' online retail buying behavior without any empirical analysis hence findings of this study may be used by the researchers for further quantitative based research.

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