

Mapping customer journeys in multichannel decision-making

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Abstract

This study is focused on multichannel shopping, which refers to the integration of various channels in the consumer decision-making process. The term was coined in early 2000s to signify the integration of offline and online shopping channels. It has since evolved to encompass the proliferating number of channels and media used to formulate, evaluate and execute buying decisions^{1,2}. With explosion of mobile technologies and social media, multichannel shopping has indeed become a journey in which customers choose the route they take and which, arguably, needs to be mapped to be understood. Existing consumer decision-making models were developed in pre-Internet days and have remained for the most part unquestioned in the digital marketing discourse. Darley, Blankson, and Luethge concluded that there is a ‘paucity of research on the impact of online environments on decision making’ which also been observed in the multichannel context^{3,4}. Our study adopts an inductive approach allowing for realistic patterns to emerge of how consumers use and react to different media and channels in their shopping journeys for cosmetics. It therefore provides a threefold contribution: (1) it systematises what are widely used yet largely misunderstood practices (ZMOT, webrooming and showrooming), (2) it defines the key multichannel influences across different stages of decision-making and (3) it segments actual customer journeys into three distinct patterns that brands can use to optimise their multichannel strategies.

Keywords:

Multichannel shopping, customer journey, consumer decision-making, cosmetics, Zero Moment of Truth, ZMOT

Background and Rationale

With an explosion of mobile technologies and social media, multichannel shopping has become a journey in which customers choose the route they take and which, arguably, needs to be mapped to be understood. Existing consumer decision-making models were developed in pre-Internet days and have remained for the most part unquestioned in the digital marketing discourse. Recent developments in marketing practice have led to emergence of new terminology signaling new multichannel consumer behaviours. These practical decision-making strategies emerged in response to the fact that the Web is a place where consumers can collect information quickly and in a number of different formats. Some of the behaviours explored in the present study are:

1. *ZMOT* – Zero Moment of Truth refers to the first exposure a user has about a product or service through various social media networks. It is a term coined by Lecinski at Google, defined as *'a decision-making moment that takes place a hundred million times a day on mobile phones, laptops and wired devices of all kinds. It's a moment where marketing happens, where information happens, and where consumers make choices that affect the success and failure of nearly every brand in the world.'*⁵
2. *Showrooming* – consumer behaviour of viewing a physical product in-store but deciding to purchase it online, possibly due to the ease of price comparison. This could result in consumers leaving the store empty-handed and placing an order online^{6,7,8}.
3. *Webrooming* – consumer behaviour where the research is conducted online on a stationary or mobile device, but the product is purchased in-store⁹.

Taken collectively these effects indicate that people are exposed to increasingly complex multichannel shopping journeys. That complexity however is added only from the marketer's perspective. From a consumer perspective those new behaviours have emerged as a way of simplifying the decision-making processes in the ever expanding digital universe.

Our paper seeks to enrich and extend prior research on multichannel marketing by adopting the consumer viewpoint. It is a much needed addition to marketing discourse, complimenting the retailer's view of multichannel strategy which is the subject of a growing number of academic and practitioner articles^{2,11}. More specifically, by adopting inductive research we allow for realistic patterns to emerge of how consumers use and react to different media and channels in their shopping journeys. The aim of this paper therefore is to explore and map those journeys, benefiting both practice and academia. Such insights are of direct relevance to brands, to help them manage the customer experience better and analyse channel attribution. It is imperative for brands to embrace the multichannel experience, yet seamlessly integrating of the physical and digital worlds is an ongoing challenge¹⁰.

Theoretical discussion – the funnel is dead, long live the loop

Consumers navigate the channels in a way that suits them on any particular shopping occasion, and expect the retailers to be accessible through every touchpoint. In order to understand how *ZMOT*, *showrooming* and *webrooming* shape the customer journey, interaction of customers across multiple channels needs to be examined. An

empirical study by Frambach et al. has demonstrated that ‘*the buying stage has an important influence on channel usage intention*’¹². Consumers seek different benefits at the pre-purchase stage than during or and after purchase. This can lead to dynamic channel preference during the whole buying decision process. While Frambach et al. (2007) focused on the dichotomy of online–offline, such dualism is now largely outdated and the utilization of the growing number of channels by consumers is yet to be examined in the light of consumer decision-making¹².

Customer Journey vs. Decision Making

To fully understand the consumers’ shopping behaviour and their engagement with different touchpoints, the terms customer journey and consumer decision making process must be clarified. A review of consumer decision-making models led to the identification of the general stages consumers are said to go through to reach (or reject) a purchase decision. On the whole the process involved the cognitive and behavioural stages of need recognition, information search, and evaluating choices to form a decision that lead to purchase^{14,15}. There are various consumer decision making models such as AIDA model¹⁶, hierarchy of effects^{17,18}, hierarchy of sequence¹⁹, and Howard Sheth buying behavior model²⁰. One of the most cited and widely known consumer buying process models is the five-stage consumer decision-making process²¹. It consists of five stages a consumer is expected to go through during the process - need recognition, information searches, alternative evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase. The model has been previously discussed in online context^{3,4,22} as well as multichannel shopper segmentation²³. Because it is a schematic representation of the consumers’ cognitive stages, it is particularly applicable to ‘high involvement products’. It has been recognised that the extent of involvement within a

purchase decision does impact on the length and stages of the decision-making process. For high involvement products, extended problem solving has been observed in past studies, but for habitual or emotional purchases, the decision-making process can be much shorter.²⁴

Having conducted a metaanalysis of research published on online consumer behaviour in marketing and CB journals between 2001 and 2008, Darley et al. (2010) et al found that not a single study examined the parts of the decision-making process having to do with problem recognition, internal search, consumption, or disinvestment, and only one study investigated cognitive dissonance³. Clearly there are many gaps in extant literature and it is proposed that the lack of research in this area may stem from the lack of applicability of existing models. The current research proposes the customer journey as an alternative conceptualization of consumers' multichannel behaviours.

According to Clark, a customer journey can be defined as '*a description of customer experience where different touchpoints characterize customers' interaction with a brand, product, or service of interest*¹³'. The classification of interactions often does not follow a linear structure, as ascribed by the decision-making literature. It also involves a number of channels and reflects the emotional, behavioral as well as cognitive responses present in the process. Figure 1 compares the different aspects that distinguish customer journeys from decision making models.

[INSERT FIGURE 1: Comparison between customer journeys and consumer decision making models]

Molenaar (2010) introduced an online consumer behaviour model that is a combination between buying stages and a non-linear collection of touchpoints present

during decision-making²⁵. The ORCA model demonstrates the concept of ‘shopping 3.0’ where consumers use various channels for information search and shopping. Many touchpoints are interconnected without a strict chronological order. This model illustrates how after problem recognition many channels are utilised, information is gathered from search engines, websites, and comparison sites before making a purchase decision. This decision can then be executed through different distribution channels including trading sites or a physical shop. While this is a very useful visualisation, this model has not been validated academically, and lacks reference to mobile and social media. Utility can however be gained from it when applying to multichannel consumer journeys.

[INSERT FIGURE 2: ORCA model²⁵ (Molenaar, 2010)]

In the current study first-hand consumer shopping experiences for cosmetics are analysed. Subsequently the research maps actual shopping journeys inductively, utilising the grounded theory approach. While the above discussed models are useful in identifying the simplified stages and sequences of consumer decision-making they are only used here to aid analysis. Explanatory utility is sought from both the linear buying stages within consumer buying models, the role of emotional as well as impulse drivers, and the fluid structure of the ORCA model. This will lead to understanding the role of each channel in the various stages, as well as the different journeys consumers can take to navigate the multichannel landscape.

Methodology

The research employed multi-method approach, utilising qualitative data collection methods. It aimed to explore first-hand reports of consumer shopping journeys for cosmetic products using two data collections methods (1) personal diary (2) interview. Darley, Blankson and Luethge assert that knowledge about online consumer behavior could benefit from ‘(1) what people do or say in response to what people are presented within an experiment and (2) observed causality’³. To that effect, first-hand accounts of multichannel shopping journeys form the basis of this research. A cosmetic product context was chosen in order to provide respondents with a realistic shopping situation.

An inductive study using guided introspection was conducted first, asking 20 respondents (all women) to complete a cosmetic shopping diary. They were asked to record their thoughts, feelings and actions related to cosmetic products over two weeks, using everyday, personal language. A well-designed beauty diary with an example entry was given to each participant to incentivise them to participate. As it was an electronic diary, respondents were encouraged to incorporate multimedia – photos, videos, links.

The resulting sample of 16 research diaries was obtained and each one was followed with phase 2 - an individual interview, to elucidate on diary entries and collect more targeted information. The data from both phases was analysed using thematic analysis. An encoding process for qualitative information resulted in a list of themes and was useful to discovering patterns in phenomena²⁶. The 16 responses were hand-drawn to represent each individual’s shopping journey. Then respondents’ maps were

classified into segments, based on similarities and differences in their reported journeys.

Results and Analysis

Channel usage at different buying stages

An aggregate analysis of all the reported shopping journeys helped identify the extent of influence each channel has during different stages of decision-making. The process of mapping respondents' self-reported shopping stages indicated that a single channel may reappear during the journey multiple times. Some channels may also be used simultaneously during one shopping stage. For cosmetic shopping, in particular, Table 1 presents the channels and information sources that have been identified as most influential at each stage.

[INSERT TABLE 1: Channel usage at different buying stages in cosmetics shopping]

Segmenting customer journeys

This aggregate analysis however masks a myriad of shopping journeys, some extensive and high in channel-hopping and others shorter and low in information search. The subsequent analysis attempted to segment cosmetic shopping journeys based on journey type. All the journeys were mapped to detect patterns and behavioural themes have emerged leading to the identification of the following typology:

1. Impulsive journeys
2. Balanced journeys

3. Considered journeys

Those journey segments coincide with some of the decision-making types proposed by Solomon²⁴ in the offline setting, yet provide additional utility as the three journey types identified here have been inductively mapped as patterns in the multichannel, multi-platform and multi-device environment. Each journey type is discussed in turn below and illustrated visually with a journey map.

1. Impulsive Journeys

During impulsive journeys customers tend to spend less time searching for information. Instead they refer to their previous experience, their friends and use product trial as information sources to make swift purchasing decisions.

The intention for purchase can easily be affected by their mood or exposure to a new attractive product display. Impulsive customers can feel overwhelmed when exposed to a large amount of data which can push them to make an impulsive or emotionally-driven decision. As the below quote illustrates, for some respondents cosmetic purchase is an on-the-spot decision taken in a physical store at a cosmetics counter.

“...I love product with cute packaging. When I want to buy, I don't really search for information online. I will just ask my friends and buy it at the cosmetics counter... I don't have second thoughts on the purchase. I rarely shop online...”

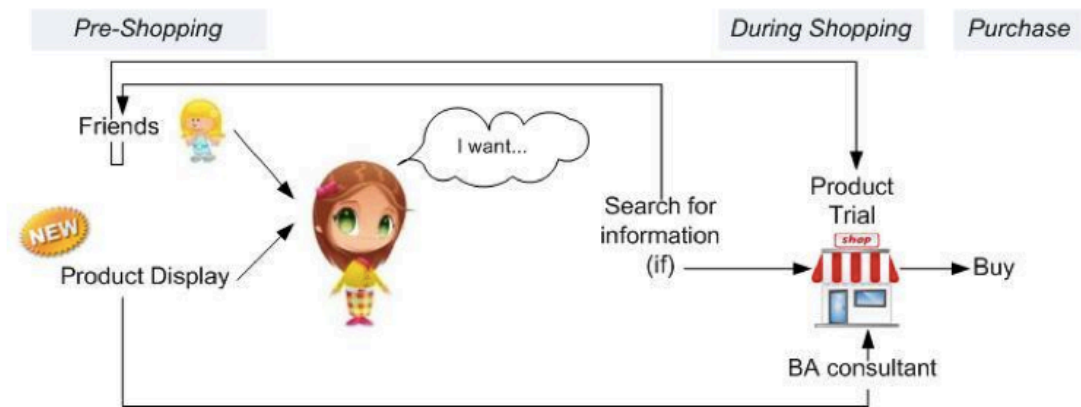


Figure 3: Impulsive Customer Shopping Journey Map

2. *Balanced Journeys*

An aspirational or reference groups such as friends, bloggers, celebrities as well as traditional and digital media can trigger balanced journeys. However crucially such journeys then exhibit an extended search for information and evaluation, which makes them distinct from impulsive journeys. Here customers initiate their intention to purchase through emotions and support their decision through cognitive evaluation. They often check information they find against a number of different sources across channels and platforms, to arrive at a purchase decision. There is evidence of webrooming and showrooming during that process, as the quote below illustrates.

“...I like watching bloggers and youtubers. The products that they use look interesting but the information is just a brief product review. I google for more in-depth reviews from blogs online. I also sometimes use the online store for references of colour swatches or product ratings. After I see the swatch and there is a store nearby, I would want to go in the store to try it out for myself. If not, I feel a bit more risk and take more time considering if I should buy the product. I will often ask my friends for advice...”

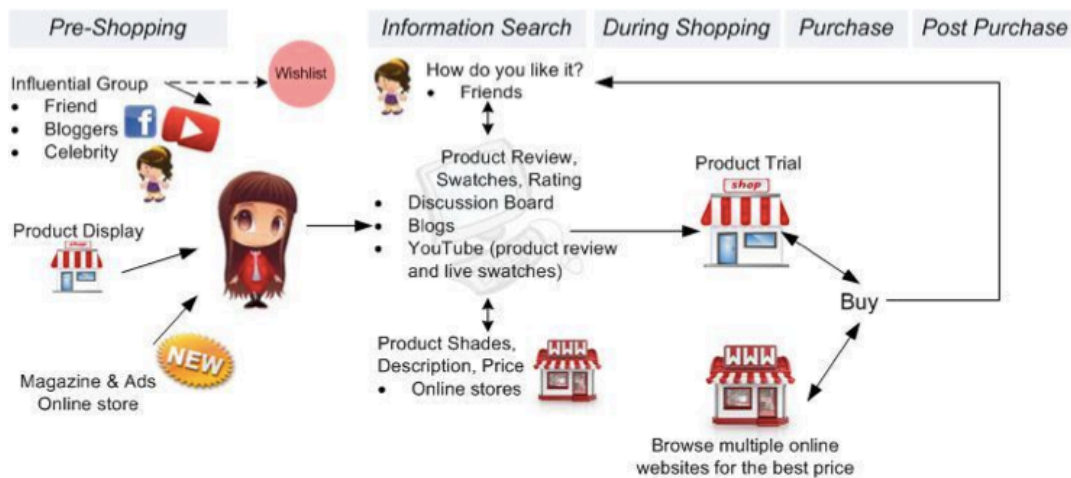


Figure 4: Balanced Customer Shopping Journey Map

3. Considered Journeys

Considered journeys have an extended pre-shopping stage, where respondents don't think of themselves as 'shopping' but gather information from a number of sources, including news, product reviews, blogs and friends, which is then stored in their personal database. This information is then used to evaluate choices when a need or want arises. The Zero Moment of Truth is most influential during these types of journey as it has an extended effect on the ultimate purchase decision by influencing the permission set customers have in their minds. The following quote illustrates the process storing and retrieving information prior to purchase.

"...Normally when I have free time, I will read forums on webboards and watch some YouTube videos but I might not want to buy at that time. Whenever I want to buy products, I remember what I have read or watched and search for just specific information to make a decision..."

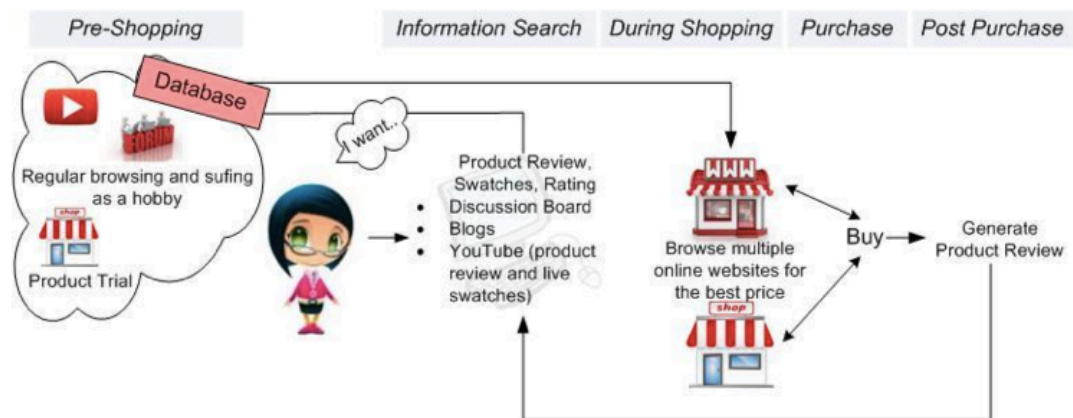


Figure 5: Considered Customer Shopping Journey Map

Role of ZMOT, Webrooming and showrooming

One of the major findings of the study is the extensive evidence of what Lecinski (2011, 2012) termed *Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT)*, and what Molenaar (2010) termed *Orientation stage*. This is a stage of shopping not explicitly identified in extant academic consumer decision-making models, yet one that in practice gives users first exposure to products, reviews and influenced their opinions through media. Respondents reported that this happens before they think of themselves as ‘shopping’, and often is seen as inspiration or on-going horizon scanning for new trends and products. Two practical examples of this process have been identified below.

Showrooming has been reported to take place during product evaluation where physical product attributes are important. In cosmetics, in particular, attributes such as colour and consistency of a lipstick, are often evaluated in store, as there is a limited return policy on health and beauty products once opened. The physical examination therefore reduces perceived risk of purchase, even if the product is eventually bought online.

Webrooming has been reported to take place once the initial product selection is identified. The Web is then used as an online showroom where ease of price and product feature comparison can help to narrow down the consideration set further. The final purchase in this case is then completed in store, where the final decision takes place.

All those behaviours have been reported by cosmetic purchasers in our study, giving academic support to the practical decision-making strategies through an inductive process of building theory through examining practice.

Conclusions and Implications

Within the practical consumer decision-making strategies, the ever-present mobile technology, and socially-mediated nature of multichannel shopping are becoming fully apparent. Understanding customer journeys has become a necessity to optimise resource allocation, help measure channel attribution and manage the multichannel customer experience. Increasingly it is also used for marketing automation purposes to guide customers through the purchase funnel by matching marketing activities against stages in the buyer journey.

This study provides a threefold contribution to practitioners: firstly, it systematises what are widely used yet largely misunderstood practices (ZMOT, webrooming and showrooming), secondly, it defines the key multichannel influences across different stages of decision-making for cosmetics and thirdly, it segments actual customer

journeys into three distinct patterns that brands can use to optimise their customer-facing strategies. Customer segmentation such as the one presented here can yield multiple buyer journeys and possibly different customer experiences – this will serve to match marketing strategy with the right content or message to the right customer at the right phase of the buying journey.

While this study particularly focuses on cosmetics as a context, a similar study is planned within other product categories, where involvement and risk perceptions differ, in order to understand the impact of those factors on customer journeys in a multichannel environment. Further research is also planned quantifying some of the inductive conclusions developed in this qualitative study. During the next stage of this research we will continue working with practitioners, and welcome further collaborations with B2C and B2B companies, agencies, and not-for profits. If you would like to get involved please get in touch with the corresponding author on @co_create.

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