



Explaining consumers' channel-switching behavior using the theory of planned behavior

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined channel-switching behavior using the theory of planned behavior in three retail channels: bricks-and-mortar stores, catalogs, and the Internet. This theory assumes that individual attitudes and beliefs, along with subjective norms and control factors, will lead to an intention to perform a certain behavior, whether to switch channels or not.

An online survey was administered at four different research sites and resulted in 547 usable surveys. Factor analysis and regression were used for data analysis.

Attitude towards channel-switching was significantly influenced by hedonic and utilitarian beliefs in stores and catalogs. However, in the case of the Internet channel, attitude towards channel-switching was only influenced by utilitarian beliefs. Normative beliefs negatively influenced subjective norms in all the channels. Self-efficacy, information, and product type were important factors that impacted perceived behavioral control (PBC) in all channels. Time influenced PBC only in catalogs, and money did not influence PBC in any of the channels. Attitude and subjective norms influenced channel-switching intentions for three channels, whereas PBC was a significant predictor for channel-switching intention for only catalogs and the Internet.

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1. Introduction

Changing consumer behavior and the advent of new technology has changed the retail industry. With consumers being proactive in their purchase decisions and better educated about products, they are able to communicate with their peers about the value of a company and its services via the Internet, and they are quick to migrate to different channels and retailers if they're not happy with the current ones (Making Every Interaction Count GameFly Aligns its Customer Experience, 2007). This behavior is called *channel-switching*, a dynamic process in which a consumer visits one of the channel options – a bricks-and-mortar store, a retailer's catalog, or the Internet (Sullivan and Thomas, 2004) – before making a purchase decision. In other words, consumers are looking for ways to maximize the benefits of shopping and minimize the costs associated with shopping, in terms of money, time, and energy, whether in a brick-and-mortar store, through a catalog, or over the Internet (Anonymous, 1999; Downs, 1961; Kim and Kang, 1997).

That being said, the retail industry is mature, and expansion has slowed to a crawl and retailers have to do more with less. Moreover, the new consumer that shops across all channels is emerging in our society. Consumers expect merchants to adapt to their schedules and to provide products, service, and information to them anyway; any time (Kurt Salmon Associates, 2000). Each channel still has its attractions and detractions for multi-channel shoppers (DoubleClick, 2003). Consumers may therefore switch channels and/or retailers depending on their shopping benefits (Pulliam, 1999). For a retailer, then, it is crucial not only to obtain knowledge about the costs and benefits associated with different channels, but also to develop an optimized channel architecture (Madlberger, 2006), through which that retailer will try to lure consumers to the optimal channel instead of waiting for them to choose one (Myers et al., 2004).

It seems that multiple channels will meet the desire for flexibility as consumers shop for what they want, when they want it, and how they want it (Johnson, 1999). The challenge, then, is to understand how and when consumers use bricks-and-mortar stores, catalogs, or the Internet and what influences their channel-switching behavior. The purpose of this study is to examine how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control predict channel-switching across three channels using the theory of planned behavior (TPB). TPB is an appropriate

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theory for studying channel-switching behavior since it has been suggested that when studying consumers' purchasing behavior PBC should be taken into consideration as channel-switching does require skills and resources and does not occur merely because consumers decide to act (Shim et al., 2001). TPB has been also used in studies that have examined multi-channel consumer behavior (Keen et al., 2004; Kim and Park, 2005). Thus, the choice of TPB for this study is acceptable.

2. Literature review

The conceptual framework of the channel-switching study presented here draws on the TPB model proposed by Ajzen (1991). This theory can adequately predict and explain human behavior in specific contexts (Ajzen, 1991). In this study, the context is channel-switching while shopping, using any combination of three channels as the retailing medium.

According to TPB, behavioral intention is the direct antecedent of the actual behavior (B). Behavioral intention is defined as an individual's likelihood of engaging in the behavior of interest and is a function of three components: (a) attitude (b) subjective norms, and (c) perceived behavioral control (PBC). Attitude, subjective norms, and PBC are measured based on the expectancy-value model. Attitude towards the behavior is a function of beliefs and the evaluation of those beliefs. Subjective norms are a function of an individual's beliefs that specific individuals or groups think he or she should or should not perform the behavior which is normative beliefs, and the individual's motivation to comply with those referents. PBC can be determined from two subcomponents: (a) control belief—perceptions of obstacles or resources affecting the behavior and (b) perceived power—importance of these barriers or resources.

2.1. Decomposition of theory of planned behavior

Decomposition of belief structures in TPB appears to produce more parsimonious and understandable models (Bagozzi, 1992; Shimp and Kavas, 1984; Taylor and Todd, 1995b). Decomposition of the belief structure also allows for a better understanding of the relationships between the belief structures and antecedents of intention, so that the various factors that impact beliefs can be investigated more thoroughly. Following this logic, in this current study belief toward switching shopping channels, the influence of family and friends, and self-efficacy and facilitating conditions including time, money, information, hedonic products, and utilitarian products, will impact the channel-switching behavior of a multi-channel consumer. Additionally, channel-switching intention will be used to predict behavior, as there is evidence that the intention to perform a behavior predicts actual behavior (Shepherd et al., 1988). Additionally, as channel-switching behavior happens under conditions of very high volitional control, behavioral intention should be the only predictor of behavior (Armitage and Conner, 2001).

2.2. Multi-channel consumers and channel-switching behavior

Multi-channel consumers are those who shop from three or more channels, (i.e. brick-and-mortar stores, catalogs, the Internet), television shopping, and direct marketing. They spend four times as much as consumers who confine themselves to one channel for all of their purchases (Goel, 2006). For instance, according to Reda (2002), traditional store shoppers who also bought on-line from the same retailers spent an average of \$600 more annually than shoppers who only shopped at brick-and-mortar stores. In shopping through the multi-channels (i.e.,

brick-and-mortar stores, catalogs and the Internet), consumers want the retail experience to be seamless, allowing them to purchase items from one channel and pick up or return them through another channel (Kurt Salmon Associates, 2000). As such, consumers want consistency, so that they can expect the same product choices in all points of contacts across all channels. Thus, an important issue for a multichannel retailer is the consumer's channel choices (Madlberger, 2006).

Given the growth of online retailing and the many shopping alternatives available to consumers, it is important for multi-channel retailers to approach their business holistically (Shern, 2000). It is imperative that the consumers' use of a channel (or channels) in a shopping process must be considered both in light of the final outcome (often, but not always, the purchased product), and in light of the process (i.e., searching and/or purchasing) of using the channel (or channels) (Balasubramanian et al., 2005).

Earlier studies have examined the shopping benefits and costs of multi-channel consumers of individual channels (i.e. brick-and-mortar stores, catalogs, and the Internet). For example, some of the studies examined shopping/purchasing using two of the three channels (i.e., brick-and-mortar stores, catalogs, and the Internet) (Bendoly et al., 2005; Dholakia and Uusitalo, 2000; Kim and Park, 2005; Levin et al., 2003; Madlberger, 2006; McGoldrick and Collins, 2007; Sullivan and Thomas, 2004). Additionally, some studies examined channel-switching behavior for utilitarian products only (Noble et al., 2005). In order to be profitable, retailers have to ensure that their consumers stay with them irrespective of the channel of shopping. Retailers will need to position their multi-channel operations as an integrated, value-rich package that generates interest and offers product exclusivity within each channel (Sinioukov, 2000; Worzala and McCarthy, 2001; Khakimjanova and Park, 2005). Also, in order to retain consumers and reduce switching to other retailers, the retailer has to provide the same kind of shopping experience across all the channels. Hence, by carefully synchronizing its channels, a retailer can create superior channel service outputs, and give its consumers fewer reasons or opportunities to switch to competitors (Rangaswamy and Bruggen, 2005). This entails comparing multiple retail channels in shopping benefits and costs perceived by consumers more holistically. Therefore, this study examines consumer switching behavior more closely with a more comprehensive product range (i.e., hedonic and utilitarian) based on the Theory of Planned Behavior model. This approach will provide valuable input to multi-channel retailers for their channel strategy. It is hoped that the study will indicate the behavioral intentions of consumers toward channel-switching and also identify the variables that predict channel-switching behavior.

2.3. Variables in the study

The purpose of this study was to predict consumer channel-switching behavior with regards to any of three channels—brick-and-mortar stores, catalogs, and the Internet. The effect of hedonic and utilitarian attitudinal beliefs, the influence of family and peers, and influence of self-efficacy and facilitating conditions were investigated in reference to channel-switching intentions. The following section presents the hypotheses and the relationship between the variables via the research model.

Beliefs toward channel-switching: hedonic and utilitarian. Since the experiential perspective recognizes the importance of various hitherto neglected variables—the roles of emotions in behavior; the fact that consumers are feelers as well as thinkers and doers; the significance of symbolism in consumption; the consumer's need for fun and pleasure; the roles of consumers beyond the act

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