



## Beyond buying: Motivations behind consumers' online shopping cart use

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### ABSTRACT

The authors investigate consumers' motivations for placing items in an online shopping cart with or without buying, termed virtual cart use. While retailers offer virtual carts as a functional holding space for intended online purchases, this study, based on a national online sample, reveals other powerful utilitarian and hedonic motivations that explain the frequency of consumers' online cart use. Beyond current purchase intentions, the investigated reasons for why consumers place items in their carts include: securing online price promotions, obtaining more information on certain products, organizing shopping items, and entertainment. Based on empirical findings, the authors offer managerial suggestions for enhancing online shopping-to-buying conversion rates.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Importance of understanding online cart use

With electronic commerce becoming a crucial aspect of marketing strategy and customer relations, there is a growing need for developing new knowledge, models and theories on Internet customer behavior. One frequent consumer behavior that managers and scholars have begun to investigate is a pressing managerial and multi-channel concern – online shopping cart abandonment (Kukar-Kinney and Close, 2010; Oliver and Shor, 2003). Yet, prior to explaining why consumers abandon their online carts, it is vital to understand motivations to use an online shopping cart in the first place. The authors define *electronic shopping cart use* as an online behavior in which a consumer places item(s) of interest in an online shopping cart. The motivations for these synergistic and at times opposing online behaviors (placing an item in a cart and purchasing during that session versus abandoning the purchase) may be different, as theories of motivation and online consumer behavior suggest.

Traditional on-ground shopping carts (e.g., grocery carts) are utilitarian, physical carts or baskets that bricks-and-mortar retailers provide customers to assist them with gathering and storing items for immediate purchase. Electronic carts, on the other hand, are virtual spaces that exist on shopping websites and are provided with a similar

purpose as traditional carts – to let customers store items for subsequent purchase at that shopping session. Retailers use also other terms, such as “my bag”, to refer to the online carts (e.g., Gap.com). Some websites keep consumers' electronic carts full after the consumer logs off without purchasing (i.e., persistent carts), but many sites automatically empty carts when the consumer closes the browser.

While e-tailers offer virtual carts to assist consumers with online purchasing, consumers' virtual cart use may not necessarily result from the need to store goods for immediate purchase (i.e., the purpose carts are designed for). Unlike traditional shopping carts, consumers may use their virtual carts as an online browsing or window shopping tool rather than an online purchase tool. Thus, the focus of the present research is to determine what motivates shoppers to use their online shopping carts – beyond the functional view of simply considering consumers' cart use as purchase intent.

### 1.2. Objectives

While reasons for on-ground cart use are relatively intuitive and practical (i.e., to hold items for the purchase at hand), researchers have yet to investigate consumers' reasons for placing items in a virtual cart. Thus, the aim of this research is to provide a theoretical model for scholars to build upon and empirical implications to aid retail managers to develop online carts that match consumers' needs. Specifically, the objective here is to build on theories of motivation to develop understanding of online shoppers' motivations for placing items in their electronic shopping carts. Further, the authors seek to understand the relationship between online cart use and online purchasing. In order to accomplish these objectives, the authors develop a

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framework explaining the frequency of both virtual cart use and the frequency of subsequent online purchasing. While there is an emerging stream of research on motivations for online shopping (e.g., Noble et al., 2006; Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004; To et al., 2007), to the authors' knowledge there are no studies explaining consumers' reasons for using online carts beyond immediate purchase intent. While managers intend, and perhaps assume, that their customers use carts solely as the place to store items prior to immediate online purchase, this research proposes other utilitarian as well as hedonic reasons for online cart use. These may include entertainment value of virtually acquiring desired items, wanting more information on an item, using the cart as a wish list of desired items, or taking advantage of a price promotion such as free shipping.

### 1.3. Overview of the article

First, the authors present a background and theory development along with a review of literature on motivations for online shopping in the areas of entertainment, pricing, shopping organization and information search to explain consumers' online cart use and online purchasing. Based on an intertwining of consumer behavior theories and electronic commerce literature, a set of hypotheses supports a framework explaining the frequency of virtual cart use and online buying. The authors then describe the online survey method and the national sample used to test the model. The article closes with a summary of the study's contributions, managerial implications, limitations and opportunities for future research.

## 2. Background and theory development

A pre-requisite to online shopping cart use is consumer acceptance of electronic shopping. Beyond usability and ease of use (Ha and Stoel, 2009), consumer attitudes, perceived congruity of e-commerce websites (Wang et al., 2009), and website personality (Poddar et al., 2009) are important determinants of online shopping acceptance. The e-commerce, marketing, and retailing literature also recognizes both hedonic and utilitarian motivations for online shopping and buying (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003; Bridges and Florsheim, 2008). Similarly, there are utilitarian and hedonic motives for using the Internet in general, such as interpersonal utility, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). Many of these motivations may also apply to the more specific online cart use behavior. Thus, utilitarian and hedonic motivations for both Internet use and shopping online may help explain what drives shoppers to use their carts.

**Utilitarian motivations.** Utilitarian factors are broad assessments of functional benefits and sacrifices (Overby and Lee 2006). Utilitarian motivations for Internet shopping use (e.g., Noble et al., 2006; To et al., 2007) may include purchase intent at the given online shopping session and financial incentives related to saving money via online price promotions. Similarly, utilitarian motives for virtual cart use may be largely goal-directed and task-based, such as placing a desired item into the cart for purchasing, or saving time and money via purchasing online in lieu of traveling to a retail store to make a purchase. Electronic shopping carts in their very nature are utilitarian as they serve as a storage space prior to purchase. Yet, their use also entails experiential, hedonic aspects of online shopping and buying.

**Hedonic motivations.** Hedonic shopping motivations are defined by the shopper's judgment of the experience-based benefits and sacrifices, as consumers may shop for the experience over completing a task. Thus, the hedonic aspect of shopping consists of fun and enjoyment of the shopping experience (Babin et al., 1994). Hedonic motivations to shop online are related to various shopping types, such as adventure shopping, gratification shopping, idea shopping, and value shopping (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). For example, as a form of entertainment, adventure shopping recognizes that shoppers seek sensory stimulation

while shopping for escapism, stimulation, and adventure. Gratification shopping often helps consumer overcome a bad mood, relieve stress, or indulge in a self-gift or personal indulgence. Idea shopping entails shopping to seek out innovative products, and the latest fads, fashions, and trends – generally to gather information more so than products. Last, value shopping comprises the thrill and rewards associated with finding a deal and acquiring a product on sale (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003).

Based on utilitarian and hedonic motivations of shopping, the proposed model suggests that the frequency of online shopping cart use is dependent upon consumers': 1) intent to make a current online purchase, 2) seeking of an online price promotion, 3) perceived entertainment value of using the cart, 4) intent to organize items of interest, and 5) information-seeking behaviors. The theoretical framework provides support for inclusion of these variables in the model of consumer online cart use next.

### 2.1. Shopping and current online purchase intent

Purchase intention is a cognitive state reflecting the consumer's plan to buy in a specified time period (Howard and Sheth, 1969). In the present research, current online purchase intent refers to *an online shopper's intention to use his or her virtual cart as a means to purchase during the current Internet session.*

Purchase intent and other utilitarian motives are goal-directed and task-based, such as placing a desired item into the virtual cart and purchasing the item(s). With such a utilitarian motivation, just as with on-ground shopping carts, the frequency of consumers' online cart use is likely due in part to their intentions to purchase those items at that time. In this sense, the cart is primarily a functional holding place needed to temporarily store the intended purchase prior to completing the transaction. Specifically, having intent to purchase at a given online shopping session should lead to an increased frequency of placing items in the cart.

**H1.** Current purchase intent will increase the frequency of consumers' online shopping cart use.

### 2.2. Price promotions

As retailers cannot assume that their website patrons use their carts to purchase a product immediately, other utilitarian and hedonic motivations for shopping cart use, such as seeking online price promotions, merit attention. For some consumers, value shopping entails looking for discounts, sales, or hunting for price promotions (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). Such monetary incentives allow consumers to experience cost savings and achieve a higher level of economic control, and consequently exhibit significant positive correlations with Internet use (Charney and Greenberg, 2001; Flanagan and Metzger, 2001; Wolin and Korgaonkar, 2003).

Here, price promotion cart use refers to *the extent to which consumers place items in their online shopping carts in order to view or take advantage of retail offers that lower the overall purchase cost, such as sales, price promotions, and free shipping.* Shoppers may decide to place an item in their cart because the item is on sale (i.e., the price has been temporarily reduced) or the site is offering another type of price promotion, such as a code-based promotion. Many Internet users expect e-tailers to offer price promotions or have lower prices than offline retailers (Maxwell and Maxwell, 2001); however, shipping and handling fees may often discourage shoppers from purchasing (Lueker, 2003; Magill, 2005). Thus, another popular aspect of online price-related promotions is free shipping or free return shipping. In addition, online price promotions provide consumers with a more pleasurable initial web shopping experience (Menon and Kahn, 2002). In sum, online price promotions provide an incentive for

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