BMSJMR: JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT & RESEARCH

ISSN – 3048-4669
VOL 3 ISS NO. 1 (JAN-JUNE 2026)
https://www.bmsgroup.in/product/bmsjmr-journal-of-management-research/
DOI **10.5281/zenodo.21400124**

Window Shopping in The Digital Age

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Abstract :

For many of us, digital window shopping is a form of escapism and stress relief. In our busy lives, immersing ourselves in a world of potential purchases provides a welcome distraction. This activity serves as a form of 'retail therapy,' offering a sense of relief even without actual buying. The joy of discovery in digital window shopping constantly captivates us. The online world offers an endless range of products, each click presenting a new surprise. This vast selection triggers a dopamine rush, a feeling familiar to many of us. It's the thrill of the hunt that propels us to continue our search for the next great find. The paper attempts to understand the consumer psychology behind digital window shopping.

Keywords: Digital Window Shopping, consumer behaviour, Influence of Social Media.

Introduction

Impulsive shopping used to be reserved just for in-store, but not anymore. Shoppers are discovering and purchasing more online than ever before. Todays consumer is constantly on the search for new products. Brand loyalty is decreasing. Time spent online is increasing. This notion of digital window shopping speaks to a seemingly large white space; a place where people peruse and explore online the way we often did when we meandered around malls and boutiques for fun, stress release, killing time, or just engaging in some frivolous window shopping 'back in the day' (aka 14-16 months ago). It's not only BuzzFeed that is tapping into the opportunity to leverage the power that sits at the intersection of commerce and content; we're seeing other publishers and platforms test various online shopping offerings driven by their content; for example, Group Nine launched a holiday season mobile storefront leveraging its Swipe.Shop commerce platform for its various websites (e.g. Dodo, Popsugar). NBCUniversal is doubling down on shoppable content after adding NBCU Checkout, a direct checkout feature within shoppable TV ads, which has been teased ahead of its One21 event. Different strategies, from exclusive product offerings, influencer collaborations, and emerging adtech investments/acquisitions in the coming months as the timeline for reimagining retail was truncated & expedited from years to months as brands, publishers, retailers, and consumers all have rapidly changing demands and expectations, as well as frictions and mindset pivots that require immediate, tangible solutions for today's weird new world. It's more than just linking where to buy buttons to publishers' content; there needs to be the right mix of content, product offering, audience understanding, and critical storytelling. But isn't this true of any offering – on or offline – for any product or service? It's not about technology/platform first; it's about identifying the consumer need, defining the ideal solution, and THEN determining what the right tools are to bring said solution to life. With more consumers turning to eComm – and screens in general – to fill every need from refills to product acquisition to killing time during a work Zoom to finding emotional fulfilment, the need for quality content and quality experiences has never been greater. Or potentially more lucrative. Especially as people have been forced to trial (whether they wanted to or not) the notion of buying nearly everything online in some capacity, as well as new forms of purchasing like DTC brands or auto-refill subscriptions, they reality is that many of these behaviors will slowly become ingrained because they provide tangible UTILITY and VALUE. The retail industry is constantly changing and undergoing significant transformations which require retailers to adapt in order to survive. Over the past couple of years, the rate of store closures has rocked the retail industry, with more than 8600 stores being expected to close in 2019 (Business Insider, 2019). However, according to the report "Retail Renaissance—true story of store openings/closings", 5.2 new stores open for each company that closes a store (IHL Group, 2019). In other words, some types of stores have almost completely disappeared, while in other industries these have increased (Amcoff et al., 2015). The emergence of new channels has been part of the transformation of the retail industry over recent decades (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021; Hultman et al., 2017), and this shows that physical retail is not dying but merely changing. Another factor that has influenced this transformation is the expansion of e-commerce, in 2018 accounting for 10% of total retail sales and continuing every year (Statista, 2019). Even though e-commerce is growing, physical store shopping is still very much alive: However, the growth of e-commerce is forcing physical stores to evolve in order to stay relevant and to meet shifting consumer demands. Today, many companies are aware of the importance of integrating channels in order to provide a seamless experience. Such integration has both received attention in research during recent years and resulted in more complex consumer behaviours and customer journey patterns (Liu et al., 2018). Today, consumers largely alternate their shopping behaviours between both online and physical stores, choosing the channel that best fits their needs at the time (Bell et al., 2014) and provides the highest value (Flavián et al., 2016). As humans we want life to be as easy as possible; that means as seamless and frictionless as possible. As we move through the pandemic, you may not know all of the behaviours you or your consumers will keep as scars or eventually dispose of as scabs, but I'm fairly confident the tools, platforms, and technologies that make your life easier, and help you digitize the dullness of everyday routines or needs, will become ingratiated into the suite of tools you turn to, like a digital, ever-present swiss-army knife of delivery. The reality is when we move into the next iteration of "normal", we won't be putting down our smartphones and smart screens; we had trouble detaching (is it really trouble if you have no interest?) long before the pandemic. But there will be a rectification as consumers try to determine which pre-pandemic and current behaviours they'll continue to adapt or modify, augmented based on what on/offline tools and platforms provide the most enriching utility and experiences that make life easier and simultaneously additive. Online shopping will continue to grow, and increasingly it will service the shopper looking for convenience: ie – replenishing non-perishable groceries, and buying items like home ware, gifts and books. In a country like South Africa, where clothing sizes are not uniform, and where shoppers still like the social as well as tactile element of shopping, the bricks and mortar experience is here to stay. However, the loss of foot traffic, and therefore sales, from online shopping has already started to affect the bottom line for many retailers. They not only have to up their game in terms of providing a "retail theatre" experience, but also keep a close watch on a new retail trend: the touch screen shoppable window. The paper attempts to understand the consumer psychology behind digital window shopping.

Literature review

A marketer has to look for different approaches to sell their products and in the current scenario, e-commerce has become the popular way of selling the goods. Whether it is durable or non-durable, everything is available from A to Z on websites. Some websites are specifically designed for specific product categories only, and some are selling everything.

The prominent factors like detailed information, comfort and relaxed shopping, less time consumption and easy price comparison influence consumers towards online shopping (Agift *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, factors like variety, quick service and discounted prices, feedback from previous customers make customers prefer online shopping over traditional shopping (Jayasubramanian *et al.*, 2015). It is more preferred by youth, as during festival and holiday season online retailers give ample offers and discounts, which increases the online traffic to a great extent (Karthikeyan, 2016). Moreover, services like free shipping, cash on delivery, exchange and returns are also luring customers towards online purchases.

More and more people are preferring online shopping over traditional shopping because of their ease and comfort. A customer may have both positive and negative experiences while using an online medium for their purchase. Some of the past studies have shown that although there are so many benefits still some customers do not prefer online as their basic medium of shopping.

While making online purchase, customers cannot see, touch, feel, smell or try the products that they want to purchase (Katawetawaraks and Wang, 2011; Al-Debei *et al.*, 2015), due to which product is difficult to examine, and it becomes hard for customers to make purchase decision. In addition, some products are required to be tried like apparels and shoes, but in case of online shopping, it is not possible to examine and feel the goods and assess its quality before making a purchase due to which customers are hesitant to buy (Katawetawaraks and Wang, 2011; Comegys *et al.*, 2009). Alam and Elaasi (2016) in their study found product quality is the main factor, which worries consumer to make online purchase. Moreover, some customers have reported fake products and imitated items in their delivered orders (Jun and Jaafar, 2011). A low quality of merchandise never generates consumer trust on online vendor. A consumer's lack of trust on the online vendor is the most common reason to avoid e-commerce transactions (Lee and Turban, 2001). Fear of online theft and non-reliability is another reason to escape from online shopping (Karthikeyan, 2016). Likewise, there is a risk of incorrect information on the website, which may lead to a wrong purchase, or in some cases, the information is incomplete for the customer to make a purchase decision (Liu and Guo, 2008). Moreover, in some cases, the return and exchange policies are also not clear on the website. According to Wei *et al.* (2010), the reliability and credibility of e-retailer have direct impact on consumer decision with regards to online shopping.

Limbu *et al.* (2011) revealed that when it comes to online retailers, some websites provide very little information about their companies and sellers, due to which consumers feel insecure to purchase from these sites. According to other research, consumers are hesitant, due to scams and feel anxious to share their personal information with online vendors (Miyazaki and Fernandez, 2001; Limbu *et al.*, 2011). Online buyers expect websites to provide secure payment and maintain privacy. Consumers avoid online purchases because of the various risks involved with it and do not find internet shopping secured (Cheung and Lee, 2003; George *et al.*, 2015; Banerjee *et al.*, 2010). Consumers perceive the internet as an unsecured channel to share their personal information like emails, phone and mailing address, debit card or credit card numbers, etc. because of the possibility of misuse of that information by other vendors or any other person (Lim and Yazdanifard, 2014; Kumar, 2016; Alam and Yasin, 2010; Nazir *et al.*, 2012). Some sites make it vital and important to share personal details of shoppers before shopping, due to which people abandon their shopping carts (Yazdanifard and Godwin, 2011). About 75% of online shoppers leave their shopping carts before they make their final decision to purchase or sometimes just before making the payments (Cho *et al.*, 2006; Gong *et al.*, 2013).

Moreover, some of the customers who have used online shopping confronted with issues like damaged products and fake deliveries, delivery problems or products not received (Karthikeyan, 2016; Kuriachan, 2014). Sometimes consumers face problems while making the return or exchange the product that they have purchased from online vendors (Liang and Lai, 2002), as some sites gave an option of picking from where it was delivered, but some online retailers do not give such services to consumer and consumer him/herself has to courier the product for return or exchange, which becomes inopportune. Furthermore, shoppers had also faced issues with unnecessary delays (Muthumani *et al.*, 2017). Sometimes, slow websites, improper navigations or fear of viruses may drop the customer's willingness to purchase from online stores (Katawetawaraks and Wang, 2011). As per an empirical study done by Liang and Lai (2002), design of the e-store or website navigation has an impact on the purchase decision of the consumer. An online shopping experience that a consumer may have and consumer skills that consumers may use while purchasing such as website knowledge, product knowledge or functioning of online shopping influences consumer behaviour (Laudon and Traver, 2009). Consumers do not have faith, and there is lack of confidence on online retailers due to incomplete information on website related to product and service, which they wish to purchase. Buyers are hesitant due to fear of online theft of their personal and financial information, which makes them feel there will be insecure transaction and uncertain errors may occur while making online payment. Some shoppers are reluctant due to the little internet knowledge. Furthermore, as per the study done by Nikhashem *et al.* (2011), consumers unwilling to use internet for their shopping prefer traditional mode of shopping, as it gives roaming experience and involves outgoing activity. Several studies have been conducted earlier that identify the factors influencing consumer towards online shopping but few have concluded the factors that restricts the consumers from online shopping.

Evolution of visual merchandising in the context of ecommerce

The rise of ecommerce as a dominant force in fashion retail means that traditional visual merchandising techniques need to adapt. Unlike a traditional physical store there is no opportunity to create captivating seasonal displays or window displays, nor is there the same opportunity to induce buying frenzies with carefully positioned bargain items and related products. Products with special features, such as textures or sustainable credentials are even more challenging to highlight. When a shopper comes into an online store, there is no telling which direction they are coming from or which products they see first. This makes it impossible to lead them on a journey in the same way as you would with the layout of a physical store, so one have to approach this differently. The online medium has many benefits and features which a physical store does not – making it possible to accomplish entirely new (digital) visual merchandising tricks:

- Smart algorithms can group products together when they are frequently purchased together, or look at the search patterns of each customer to suggest products that relate to them and their other purchases.
- High-resolution photography enables shoppers to see details of item textures and materials with greater acuity than would be possible with their own eyes.
- Lighting can be customised during each photo-shoot to provide the maximum effect – in a brick-and-mortar store this is always a challenge.
- Careful staging of each photograph can also ensure that complementary colours bring the best out of each item.
- Video is now becoming a more integral part of the online visual merchandising strategy, and this is widely used by many of the more disruptive retailers who leverage video via social platforms to directly instigate sales.
- Augmented Reality (AR) technology gives retailers interesting options for bringing the physical retail experience to distant shoppers, and for joining the digital world with visits to physical stores.
- AR technology can also be used to show how items look when worn by the actual customer – bringing a new level of closeness to the customer-retailer relationship.

- 3D modelling of clothes that shows them in motion, with the movement of the fabrics accurately simulated, gives a new option to showcase products including those that have not yet been made or which are made-to-order.

Reinventing window shopping

It's that time of year when two distinct shopping tribes emerge: those who are going to flock to the malls for their Christmas shopping, and those who are going to avoid them at all costs. The avoiders (and I count myself in this group) are not only crowd phobic, but more importantly hyper allergic to the fabricated festive cheer that engulfs shopping malls at this time of year. For me, it's not so much the garish decorations and fake snow that offends, but rather the soundtrack that malls feel they have to bombard the shoppers with: an incessant loop of Christmas carols, with a track or two of Boney-M thrown in for good measure. Unfortunately, that brings out a Scrooge-like reaction in many people. However, for the "bah humbug" shoppers there is light at the end of the tunnel – or rather a touch screen. Online shopping is evolving at an incredible rate, and while retailers started out looking at the online vs offline shopping experience as two separate entities, it is becoming very clear that it is going to be a hybrid of the two shopping experiences that is the new emerging trend. Online shopping will continue to grow, and increasingly it will service the shopper looking for convenience: ie – replenishing non-perishable groceries, and buying items like home ware, gifts and books. In a country like South Africa, where clothing sizes are not uniform, and where shoppers still like the social as well as tactile element of shopping, the bricks and mortar experience is here to stay. However, the loss of foot traffic, and therefore sales, from online shopping has already started to affect the bottom line for many retailers. They not only have to up their game in terms of providing a "retail theatre" experience, but also keep a close watch on a new retail trend: the touch screen shoppable window. UK supermarket chain, Tesco, was the first retailer to explore the concept of taking the store to the customer. They allowed customers in South Korea to do their grocery shopping, using QR codes, whilst waiting on subway station platforms. Since then, this concept has not only spread across the globe, but it has also evolved, revolutionising the shopping experience for customers, but at the same time giving traditional retailers sleepless nights. eBay is taking the lead in this e-tailing journey. A few months back they launched a series of "shoppable windows" in New York. The concept was simple but revolutionary. They set up giant touch screens in the windows of vacant shops. These screens allowed passers-by to stop and browse through an online catalogue (their first collaboration was with fashion brand Kate Spade), and if they found an item they liked and wanted, they could buy it immediately using an on-screen QR code and the online payment portal, PayPal. The biggest novelty factor in this shopping experience was not so much the fun of touch-screen shopping, but eBay's promise that any purchase would be delivered to an address of your choosing within the hour. Having to actually carry shopping bags is soon going to be "so 2010". Explained the concept to someone recently, they asked, "What's the point of shoppable windows, when you can just buy online?" The answer is two-fold: immediacy and social interaction. Shoppable windows bridge the gap between the solitary nature of online shopping with the enjoyment of shopping with someone, in a public space. It also speaks to the impulsive shopper (which is why so many people actually enjoy shopping) but then goes one step further and provides the convenience of not having to carry the package around with you. For the shopper, this is truly a revolutionary digital, retail experience. For brands, this concept opens up a whole new world of possibilities because what shoppable windows (as well as online shopping portals) provide is the luxury of presenting your full stock offering digitally, without having to physically have the stock on your shop floor. The impact this will have on stock control, manufacturing, overheads and therefore cash flow is immense. The only people who are not going to embrace this form of hybrid retail are of course the landlords. Shoppable windows will allow brands to have a presence in locations without having to commit to long leases, or have to deal with the expense of shop fittings. All of those costs will now be funneled into warehousing as more and more people become accustomed to the benefits of online retail.

Case studies on Window Shopping: How Retailers Are Rethinking Their Businesses For The Digital Age

Case Study 1 - Allbirds

Allbirds is a go-to example of a mature DTC brand that's now invested heavily in brick-and-mortar – the mirror image of legacy retailers repositioning their store footprints for ecommerce. The store presence is important for Allbirds because repeat customers who engage with the brand online and in stores spend 50% more than repeat shoppers who buy either in stores or online, but not both, according to CEO Joey Zwillinger, during the company's second earnings call since going public in November. Digital channels remain "far and away" the largest source of new customers, said CFO Mike Bufano. Ecommerce is also still 80% of the company's overall sales. But the retail presence improves the overall profit margin. Shoes cost the same wherever, but it's more profitable for Allbirds to sell a pair at a store rather than ship to someone's home. Allbirds is also considering its first major wholesale deals, following two small tests with Nordstrom's. Wholesaling is a risk – Allbirds doesn't own the data or customer relationship, but gains visibility, which Zwillinger said is critical because only 11% of US consumers are familiar with the brand. It would be "really disappointing" to see a retailer offering big Allbirds sales, he said, since the company historically doesn't discount – it experimented with discounts for the first time during the Thanksgiving shopping stretch in 2021. "We had 97% full-price yield for the year last year, which is really high for the industry, and maybe even unhealthily high, frankly," Zwillinger said. "And we would never enter into a relationship with someone who we thought might degrade that."

Case Study 2 - Best Buy

Best Buy is a late-mover to subscription memberships and an ad platform. But it's investing heavily now and expects to see the benefits by 2025, the company told investors this month. Totaltech, Best Buy's $200 membership program, counts 4.6 million members –3.7 million of whom were auto-enrolled from the retailer's legacy customer service programs. Then there's Best Buy Ads, the in-house media business launched in January. For now, advertising shows up in Best Buy's finances in the form of margin expansion – It's not a standalone revenue producer, but is recorded as an offset to overall cost of sales, said CFO Matt Bilunas. (For instance, Best Buy could serve ads to customers rather than offer low-price promotions. If the campaign drives as many sales but to full-priced products, then the ad spend still improved the profit margin. An ad campaign that prompts online shoppers to store pickup rather than home delivery also saves the company money.) Eventually, businesses will use Best Buy Ads to understand customers more broadly, not just to drive sales in a Best Buy store, as the platform is used today, said CEO Corie Barry. Which kind of customers become power users? Who requires constant customer service visits? What kind of marketers want to reach Best Buy-type customers, even if they don't sell products in Best Buy stores? Once Best Buy Ads is used by marketers in a more involved way, Barry said, advertising will form its own revenue line, rather than materializing as a form of margin control.

Case Study 3 - Express

The mall-based brand Express is on a mission to modernize.

It now reports metrics similar to DTC or ecommerce-native brands, such as online video reach across YouTube, TikTok and Instagram Reels, organic Google brand traffic and monthly app users. "All important indicators of the health and vitality of our brand continue to increase," CEO Tim Baxter told investors. These measures are important to Express because, as Baxter said, its app-based shoppers make on average five more store visits and spend over $300 more per year than those who visit only the store or site. Express is tracking DTC brands in other ways as well. Express's UpWest brand, an ecommerce-native unit launched in 2019 that positions itself as a "brand with a purpose" to drive sustainability, now has a wholesale business – Express and Allbirds each announced their forays into wholesale on recent earnings reports.

Case Study 4 - Macy's

Like other major brick-and-mortar retailers, Macy's is in the midst of a transformation led by a loyalty program, and sitting atop a new ad platform business. The name on Macy's transformation program is Polaris, the name of the north star – and its north star is lifetime customer value, said CEO Jeff Gennette. "To best realize our strategic goal of building profitable lifetime customer relationships, we successfully built a new enterprise data and analytics organization that is helping us to embed data and analytics into everything we do," he said. For instance, by strategically offering personalized discounts rather than storewide sales, Macy's creates more multi-item online carts, rather than one-off purchases, he said. That means the company spends less on per-hour labor to package and ship that purchase as a percent of the overall cost. Macy's also now uses personalized pricing to move specific inventory it needs to clear out or consolidate to specific stores, again as a way to preserve its labour hours. The Macy's Media Network, as the ad business is called, generated $105 million in revenue last year, according to CFO Adrian Mitchell. But as with other retailers early in their ad platform development, Macy's advertising is more about profit margin management than growing one revenue line. As Gennette noted in his examples of personalized pricing benefits, advertising is a way to save labour costs on online orders as much as a revenue generator. Macy's tracks ad revenue as part of its Selling, General & Administrative expenses – similar to Best Buy, and in contrast to Walmart and Target breaking out ad revenue.

Case Study 5 - Target

Target is off to the races in terms of its retail media and first-party data products. Following Amazon and Walmart, Target broke out its ad revenue for the first time this quarter, reporting a cool billion dollars in 2021. "From its humble beginnings in 2007 with just 5 team members, [then] known as Online Vendor Marketing, Roundel is now a 500-plus person strong fully integrated Target team," said CEO Brian Cornell. Roundel and Circle, Target's 100-million-person loyalty program, are the linchpins of Target's strategic shift from broad promotional discounts to personalized deals, according to CFO John Mulligan. The company tested storewide price discounts against personalized sales during the holidays last year. Personalized offers converted 70% compared to 40% for mass discounts, and averaged $8 to $10 larger carts at checkout. "How we are leveraging media to know our guests better and create a more relevant and personalized experience for them is incredibly exciting," Mulligan said. And Roundel's impact extends beyond the $1billion dollars Target reported for the business, he said. "A meaningful portion of Roundel's income reduces our cost of sales, benefiting our gross margin." That's because the ad unit is tied very closely to store shopping behaviour."We know the way we run our stores is the secret to growing digital sales," Mulligan said. More than half of online orders are processed at the store. Orders purchased online and picked up at a store – "the quickest fulfillment at the lowest cost" he said – are the fastest-growing segment of Target's entire business.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

The digital transformation facilitates and enables new ways of value creation because it allows for the fulfilment of long-standing consumer needs in unprecedented ways. As sources of value creation, automation, individualization, ambient embeddedness, interaction, and transparency and control combine a plethora of activities and processes. The basic premise is that customers will likely prefer to interact with players that best accomplish value creation on these dimensions.

CONCLUSION

With the ongoing transformation of retail, and the ever-evolving development of digital social media, the virtual place has become increasingly important. With this, the digital service offering challenges traditional concepts of what constitutes a customer experience and customer value. Hence, physical stores are being challenged to become smarter and to provide greater value to both consumers and retailers. With the transformation of retail, consumer expectations are rapidly changing, making it important for retailers to keep up in order to meet consumer needs.

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