A COMPARISON OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE GENDER AND GOAL DIRECTED SHOPPING ONLINE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to model the effect of the consumers’ perceptions of their offline and online gendered behaviour on online utilitarian shopping motivation and purchase intentions. We propose that when consumers shop online their behaviour is mediated by two gendered behaviors; offline and online. Therefore, gender is defined by the environments effect on behaviour. To test this proposition, five hundred and fifteen usable responses were collected in face-to-face interviews. The conceptual model was tested with confirmatory factors analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) across 5 product categories. Our findings show that the effect of a consumer’s perception of their gendered behaviour offline vs. online on, online utilitarian shopping motivation and purchase intentions is significantly different. We conclude that online gender for females has a strong mediating effect across all product categories on online utilitarian shopping motivation and purchase intentions. For males it is their offline gender that has a strong mediating effect. Research implications are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to model the effect of consumers’ perceptions of their offline and online gendered behaviour on, online utilitarian motivation and purchase intentions (Babin et al. 1994; Roy and Ng 2012; Wood 2005). This aim is concerned with optimizing the online shopping experience (Sheehan 1999), suggesting how variations in gender on and offline enable consumers to allow consumers “to experience the body’s needs by a virtual projection of the mind into cyberspace” (Achrol and Kotler 2012, p. 38). We propose that when consumers shop online their behaviour is mediated by two gendered behaviors; offline and online. This research is important as online and offline behaviour is not well understood (Brown et al. 2007; Danaher et al. 2003). While previous research has measured gender effects (e.g., Cleveland et al. 2006; Dobscha 2003; Hyllegard et al. 2005; Laforet 2008) there have been no studies to measure gender-related behaviour offline and online, modeling the impact on online shopping motivation and purchase intentions (Alreck and Settle 2002). Otnes and McGrath (2001) argue this is a gap in our understanding because gender-related shopping behaviour often contradicts socially constructed and biological stereotypes (Gentry et al. 2003). Further, Bettany et al. (2010, p. 16) argues that we should be moving towards developing theories that help us understand gender related issues. McLaren et al. (2004) supports this position requesting: “comparative research is also required to look at multiple consumption” of “the same product or service and assess how the gendered and gendering effects differ across the respective social settings.” The existing literature on whether gender matters in the relationship between utilitarian motivation and purchase intentions is disparate. Several studies have portrayed women online to be the principal shoppers (Dholakia and Chiang 2003; Mitchell and Walsh 2004), but others suggests that males tend to shop online more in technology-mediated channels (Wajcman 1991). Recent work has suggested there is no difference between males and females in their shopping behaviour (Kim and Forsythe 2008).

Little help has come from other research to help to resolve this debate. For example, women are portrayed as nurturing, person-oriented, and child-centered, whereas men were seen to be competitive and work-oriented (Alreck and Settle 2002; Dholakia and Chiang 2003). Rodgers and Harris (2003) found that in nearly every study exploring gender in online shopping environments, males were typically reported to be the dominant online shopper. Gendered behaviour within technology environments is further illustrated in Smith and Whittlark’s (2001) study of the online consumer behaviour of males and females. Situations in which women tended to be associated with when using technology-mediated services included making friends, fighting for causes, nurturing children, role-playing, and improving on-the-job productivity (Neilson 2010). Men were information hungry and desired detailed and accurate information to questions relating to investments, product purchases, and personal interests. The limitation of these studies is that they fail to challenge current stereotypes (Anderson 1986; Marsh 1985). Some resolution to the debate comes from Bem (1974) who proposed that gender is behaviour, popularizing the concept of psychological androgyny, that is, gender is a function of behaviour (Smiler and Epstein 2010, p. 134). Smiler and Epstein (2010) have cautioned against its use because of it psychometric properties and argued that this approach to measuring gender is over 30 years old and out of date compared to today’s social environment. To help reconcile this debate we model the effect of the consumers’ perceptions of their offline and online gendered behaviour on utilitarian motivation and purchase intentions. We suggest that the variation may be constructed by the context in which the consumer
exists, that is, gender offline or online. Therefore, our research question is: Does gender (online and offline) matter in the relationship between utilitarian motivation online and purchase intentions online?

The contribution of this research is three-fold. We conceptualize and measure gender in different environments and model the impact of these differences on shopping motivation and purchase intention. This is important because there is no empirical evidence that supports the hypothesis that a consumer’s gender is the same offline and online. The measurement of gender in this way has also not been done before and its effects on shopping motivation are unclear. Furthermore, marketers may be incorrectly assuming that, in the design of their strategies, no account should be taken of gender differences. This study will also help marketers to understand the different ways in which males and females may exhibit cross-gender perceptions of techno-consumption. This could provide further insight into some of the key situations that drive men and women to use technology-mediated channels. This paper is structured as follows. To build our conceptual model and hypotheses, we first discuss the importance of shopping motivation in terms of utilitarian consumption and gendered behaviour. This leads to our conceptual model and hypotheses. The methodology precedes our data analysis and discussion of the results and their implications.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

In this research we first posit that, in the relationship between a consumer’s utilitarian motivation to shop online and retail purchase intentions, gender will have a mediating effect. Gender behaviour will differ because of the environment in which the consumer shops, that is, whether online or offline (Brown et al. 2007; Noble et al. 2006). This proposition is supported by Sengupta et al. (2002) and Argo et al. (2006) and, who found empirical evidence that a consumer’s gender related behaviour will vary because of the effect of symbolic consumption and social comparison. Offline a male engages in what society perceives to be typical male behaviors. These male traits diminish online: he is able to break free of (1) the gender constraints and comparisons rooted in society (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Mitchell and Walsh 2004; Thompson 1996) and (2) restraints defined by biological determinism (Dobscha 2003; Gentry et al. 2003; Martin 2003). He is able to change his behaviour online because there is no physical interaction (Davis et al. 2000). He is able to participate in female-oriented chatrooms, browse for and purchase female-oriented products such as skincare supplies, and even develop an online relationship with another male. Once the online experience is over, he then reverts back to his male self. Second: the importance of utilitarian shopping motivations (Holbrook 1982, Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Holbrook and Gardner 1998) offline and online (Childers et al. 2001; Wood 2005). Motivations for retail shopping can differ, depending on whether the consumer’s motivation is primarily experiential (hedonic) or goal-directed (utilitarian) (Wang 2007).

A utilitarian approach at its extreme is associated with terms such as task-oriented, instrumental, rational, and efficient and is also defined by Ahtola (2001) as an attitude pertaining to the usefulness, value, and wisdom of a particular behaviour as exhibited by a consumer. Utilitarian motives usually reflect a work mentality (Babin et al. 1994) and are dependent on whether the task at hand was accomplished. The consumer employing a utilitarian approach will thus experience greater levels of satisfaction once they feel they have made an efficient and purposeful purchase especially if done in a fastidious manner. Dholakia (1999) observes that the motivations and approaches taken towards shopping are reflected by the cultural and socialization conditions surrounding the consumer. Since gender is also culturally derived (Palan 2001), it is assumed that the cultural understandings of what is masculine and what is feminine will be associated with the approach taken towards shopping. Since shopping is categorized mainly as a female-oriented activity (Dholakia 1999) and is reported by women to help them relax, socialize and to enhance a special occasion (Buttle and Coates, 1984), the literature promotes that female-oriented consumers will be associated with hedonic rather than utilitarian shopping behaviour (Dittmar et al. 2004).

A consumer employing hedonic feminine behaviour may tend to savor the shopping experience by participating in the online chat rooms and reading book reviews. Men want detailed and accurate information about the products they wish to purchase, yet they are not willing to work very hard to get it (Smith and Whitlark 2001). Thus, the literature argues that masculine-oriented customers will be associated with utilitarian shopping behaviour (Dittmar et al. 2004), wanting to complete the task of shopping with minimum time and effort. A key proposition of this research is that consumers may display different gender orientations online compared to their offline social and biological construction, challenging what Cockburn and Ormrod (1993) showed technology related gender symbolism. The Internet in contrast has allowed consumers greater freedom of expression in their gender (Chen et al. 2002). McLaren et al. (2004, p. 149) argues that the Internet provides an “escape route” from the “cultural constrictions of gender.” Kozinets et al. (2003) and Schau and Muniz (2003) argue for prosthetic feminism online promoting gender online as the private androgynous self (Argo et al. 2006) that is more akin to their own gendered symbolic consumption (Sengupta et al. 2002). Therefore, given these two key research propositions, we model the mediating effect of the consumers perceived gender behaviour (offline and online) on utilitarian shopping motivation online.