

Feeling Disconnected: Protection Motivation and Acceptance of Online Shopping During COVID-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the broader retail industry hard, and caused store closings and bankruptcies worldwide. However, paradoxically, the pandemic has also increased several big-box retailers' profit margin (Keenan, 2020). For example, Target experienced a 24 percent increase in their online sales during the third quarter of 2020 compared to last year (Miranda, 2020). The primary reason for this improved financial performance is their rapid operational adjustment to consumers' increased online shopping behavior through such technological advancements and services as same-day delivery, curbside pickup, buy online/pick up in-store, contactless shopping and delivery, and ship from store (Keenan, 2020). Many consumers who never used online shopping before or used to shop both offline and online have become inclined to shop only online during the pandemic (Watanabe & Omori, 2020). Because of lockdowns and the desire to protect themselves from COVID-19, consumers were unable to visit physical stores as usual. Further, the prolonged period of "social distancing" and "stay-at-home" protocols have reduced consumers' psychological wellbeing. One of the psychological barriers relates to consumers' perceptions of being disconnected and excluded from social settings. The need to belong, have interpersonal relationships, and create social connections are the determining forces in consumer goods consumption (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify social connectedness's (i.e., feeling more or less connected) moderating role in online consumers' perceptions of shopping during COVID-19.

Literature Review

The protection motivation theory (PMT, Roger, 1983) and technology acceptance model (TAM, Davis, 1989) were used as the theoretical frameworks in this study, together with social connectedness (SC, Lee & Robbins, 1995) as the moderator. PMT posits that there are two cognitive appraisal processes: Threat and coping, by which an individual assesses threatening events such as a pandemic. Threat appraisal consists of two factors: 1) Perceived severity, and 2) perceived vulnerability and coping, which is comprised of two factors, response efficacy and self-efficacy. PMT has been used in research on consumers' intention to self-isolate (Farooq et al., 2020) and subsequent retail channel switching behavior (Youn et al., 2021) during COVID-19. In the original TAM model, Davis (1989) suggested that two factors, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, influence a consumer's change in attitude toward new technology. Davis et al. (1992) later added another factor, perceived enjoyment, in their TAM model as an antecedent of consumers' attitudes toward adopting new technology. In this study, the adoption of new technology was the change in consumers' tendency to switch from offline to online shopping using such online technologies as mobile app, websites, touchless payments, etc. According to Lee and Robbins (1995, p. 233), "Social connectedness refers to the senses of

belonging and affiliation that occur within close interpersonal relationships.” Existing research has shown that frequent use of online platforms i.e., shopping online, results in increased social disconnection and alienation; however, it also facilitates the creation of online social communities (Bellis & Johar, 2020). Presently, there is little to no research on the way social connectedness can moderate the effects of perceived health risk and technology use on consumers’ attitudes and behavior toward online shopping.

Methods

The survey included questions that measured severity, vulnerability, self-efficacy, and response efficacy (Johnston & Warkentin, 2010). It also included questions that measured perceived usefulness, enjoyment, ease of use, attitude, and behavioral intention (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; Kim & Karpova, 2010). All questions were answered on a 5-point Likert scale. To measure the perception of connectedness attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic, three items that asked about the perception of isolation were adopted (i.e., lack of companionship, left out, and isolated from others; Hughes et al., 2004). Responses were collected from 839 participants through MTurk. Based on the mean values of their perceptions of connectedness pre- and post-COVID-19, we categorized participants into three groups: Less connected, No difference, and More connected. We adopted PLS-SEM to analyze the proposed model across those three groups, and examined the results related to the measurement model (Hair et al., 2019). Then, a multi-group analysis (MGA) was performed.

Results

After measurement invariance was examined, we conducted MGA to compare the differences among the three sub-groups: Less connected vs. More connected, No difference vs. More connected, and Less connected vs. No difference. The results indicated that there was no significant difference in the paths the protection motivation theory proposed, while significant differences were identified in the paths the TAM theory suggested. Specifically, perceived usefulness’s effect on attitude was stronger in the less connected and no difference groups when compared to the effect in the more connected group. Conversely, perceived enjoyment’s effect on attitude was stronger in the more connected group compared to the effect in the less connected and no difference groups. Further, perceived ease of use’s effect on perceived usefulness was stronger in the less connected and no difference groups when compared to the effect in the more connected group.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings revealed that although consumers perceived a threat from the COVID-19 virus and evaluated online shopping as an effective way to avoid it, this effect on attitude did not differ depending upon different levels of feeling (dis)connected. However, consumers’ perceptions of functional or emotional aspects of the service influenced their post-pandemic adoption behavior differently depending upon their perception of (dis)connectedness during COVID-19. This provides scholarly implications by exploring online shopping behaviors according to two theories during the pandemic. Finally, the study offers practical implications by suggesting that understanding consumers’ psychological aspects (i.e., feeling disconnected) is important, as it potentially influences consumption behavior.

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