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Online Buying Behaviour of UK University Students

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Abstract

Using a quantitative approach, the study is an attempt to comprehend the online buying behaviour of University B students after the COVID-19 pandemic. 93 students were surveyed through questionnaires and 7 in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data in relation to purchasing habits, behaviour and preferences of the students. The study revealed male students were more inclined towards online shopping than female students. In terms of frequency, it was noted that the number of times the respondents shopped and the time spent on shopping was more in the case of female respondents as compared to the male students. The study also identified reasons for shopping online and time-saving and convenience emerged as the most prominent reasons among the respondents. The study contributes to the existing literature on online buying behaviour of University students. It can assist marketers develop the strategies to increase their sales by enhancing the shopping experience of their prospective buyers. In addition, the study can serve as a basis to understand the buying behaviour through the aspects of economic, social, political, anthropological, etc. The use of quantitative method in the study enabled identifying the factors that have a significant impact on the online buying behaviour of consumers and the same can be used by strategists and companies to increase their profitability in the long run.

INTRODUCTION

Online consumer buying behavior is a study of customers in which marketers determine which individuals, groups, and organizations can be targeted and satisfied through the online delivery and presentation of goods, services, or experiences (Kotler and Keller, 2011). It was also explained as a set of activities that involve the purchase, and use of goods and services because of a customer's mental, and emotional behavior (Stallworth, 2008). Consumer behavior is important to understand across any type of business, as consumers are continuously changing and varying. Hence, a failure to understand the preferences, needs, and wants of the customer can result in a loss of profits. However, understanding the behavior of the consumer can be considered challenging (Parment, Kotler, and Armstrong, 2021). Therefore, many marketers' decision is to focus on customer buying decisions instead. Consumer buying behavior has changed dramatically due to the unfortunate event of the COVID-19 outbreak (Laato, 2020), as shoppers shifted most of their buying habits online. Moreover, many businesses took the path of stores closure. Thus, many stores found difficulty in meeting the customers' demand while they kept their online stores open (Kumar, 2020). According to (Sheth, 2020), people tended to focus more on purchasing first-need products instead of luxury products as a reason of thinking of what can come after the

pandemic. the consumer buying behavior change was a result of the online transaction becoming a common practice (Sharma and Jhamb, 2020). (Zaky, Mohamed, and Saxena, 2022) believe that a panic buying phase distinguished between consumer behavior before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The sector of higher education was one of the many sectors affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. (Edghiem, Abualqumboz, and Mouzughi, 2021) stated that the UK's higher education sector went through profound changes because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This raised the desire to study the university students' buying behavior online post-COVID-19 pandemic, their shopping habits, reasons for choosing to shop online rather than in-store, and the students' opinions on shopping online. Hence, this paper aims to understand the online buying behavior of university students post-COVID-19

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, we aim to explore the relationship between online consumer behavior and its associated impacts. In doing so, an extensive literature review has been conducted to examine existing research on the topic, discuss key reports and studies, and determine the key elements and implications. The following literature review will provide an overview of the existing research surrounding online consumer behavior and its associated implications.

The Concept of Consumer Buying Behavior Online

The term consumer buying behavior online was recently adopted (Yoo and Donthu, 2001). It is considered a convenient type of shopping as consumers do their shopping in their comfort zone and chosen time. Online consumer behavior is the process of how consumers interact with and experience products, services, and brands through digital channels. It's estimated that 86% of the world's population is expected to conduct their shopping online in 2022 (digital consumer trends index, 2022). Online shopping also allowed businesses to interact with their customers more and in a cost-effective manner without the need of bearing the costs of an actual store. Additionally, it allowed marketers to understand and stay up to date with trends in online consumer behavior. With the aid of recent technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, marketers can analyze data to gain insights into consumer needs, wants, and behaviors. Moreover, organizations use the data collected from their online buyers to improve their business creating more effective products, campaigns, and strategies that improve their return on investment (RoI). (Blythe and Sethna, 2019) advocated that studying consumer buying behavior online is fundamental for marketers to understand the reasons and the means of peoples' buying decisions, which is important in constructing a valuable marketing strategy.

Consumer behavior is an activity that customers undertake when acquiring a product or a service (Pachauri, 2001). Moreover, online consumers have accessibility, privacy, and convenience at any desirable time or place with unlimited options and an abundance of information; critics and reviews on each product or store that they decide to shop from. Online consumer behavior takes into account the factors which influence the decisions and activities of consumers when using the internet for purchases. These factors include but are not limited to, purchase intention, attitude toward the product, trustworthiness, and security (Pachauri, 2001). Through a detailed analysis of the browsing context, the effects of consumer behavior, navigation, specific characteristics of

the product, and user review scores, online retailers are able to understand the customer's behavior (Hwang and Jeong, 2016). As time progresses, online retailers have begun to use customer analytics, and customer relationship management in order to better understand who their customers are and what they value (Hirschowitz, 2001). By accessing customer analytics, companies are able to develop effective online marketing strategies in order to reach their target customer base.

Buyer Behavior Models

Research and analysis have continued to be conducted in order to effectively attract, engage, and retain customers. Businesses use buyer behavior models to better understand and anticipate their customers' needs. Buyer behavior models are important when it comes to marketing and understanding why people purchase products or services. For decades, marketers have been studying buyer behaviors through various models that help to explain why people perform certain purchases. Buyer behavior models help to understand the decision-making process during customer purchases. Generally, such models involve the four stages; Awareness, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA) (Nevo, 2011; Hassan, Nadzim, and Shiratuddin, 2015). In the Awareness stage, the customer recognizes a need and begins to research possible solutions. In the Interest stage, the customer starts to search for more information about some of the options and compares them. In the Desire stage, the customer puts a preference for one of the options. In the final stage, Action, the customer purchases the selected product or service (Ghirvu, 2013).

Buyer behavior models aid in analyzing consumer decision-making in response to marketing variables such as product characteristics, price, advertising, and promotions. These models are useful to marketers and consumer researchers to understand consumer preferences and behavior, as well as to generate insights on the best way to reach existing and potential customers. Moreover, they are used to identify and predict consumer behavior. The purpose of creating such models is to understand how people come to make buying decisions and how different factors influence their decisions. These models take into account various aspects that may influence buyers, such as cultural values, geographical, economic, and other factors (Sheth, 2021). Consumer behavior models can be separated into two major categories: traditional and contemporary (Johnson and Stewart, 2017). A traditional model was introduced by (McLeod, 2007), including the learning model, which is based on the belief that the customer is bounded by satisfying basic, and learned needs. The sociological model is based on the idea that someone's social status and influence in a societal group can affect their purchasing decisions. The psychoanalytic model argues that conscious, and subconscious influences are both involved in driving consumer behavior. The economic model considers that consumers meet their needs at the least cost possible.

Contemporary models focus more on the process of decision-making to purchase a product or a service (Koufaris, 2002). Contemporary models include the Black Box model also named as Stimulus-Response model in which the customer responds to various stimuli and transforms these stimuli into responses on which customers base their purchasing decisions. Howard-Sheth's model also focuses on the concept of stimulus-response but goes beyond the Black Box model, discussing it in a more comprehensive manner, and in-depth exploration of the input and output variables, as well as the perceptual and learning constructs. The model suggests that consumer decision-making is a multi-step process including problem recognition, information search and evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation. Engel-Kollat-Blackwell's (EKB) model outlines five rational decision-making steps in the process of purchasing a product

or service. Information collection and evaluation are utilized by consumers when making their purchases (Sheth, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a quantitative research design method based on a survey questionnaire to focus on studying consumer buying behavior, targeting UK university students. Quantitative research based on a survey questionnaire is one effective way for researchers to garner information, and understand people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. As a general approach, this type of research design allows researchers to present individuals with a set of questions, giving them the opportunity to provide feedback based on predetermined criteria (Ricci *et al.*, 2019). These types of surveys are far-reaching, as they can be conducted both in-person and electronically, thereby increasing the potential response rate. Furthermore, since surveys collect data from a larger sample size, they can provide a more well-rounded view of the targeted population. Thus, the use of survey questionnaires as a quantitative research design method is an effective technique for data collection for the online consumer behavior of students. The questions posed on the survey are relevant to the researched topic in the study and based on previously published research and theory (Singh and Sailo, 2013; Lester, Forman, and Loyd, 2006; Jadhav and Khanna, 2016). The survey is also designed to ensure response bias is avoided, and appropriate for the targeted population. Hence, the results concluded in this study can provide a wealth of data that can be further analyzed, interpreted, and used as a building stone in future research.

A convenience sampling method was followed to collect 93 responses, sending online and offline questionnaire forms, as well as one-on-one interviews with 7 UK university students. This type of sampling is considered a non-probability sampling design. As it depends on the available members of the population to form a sample size. Two common types of convenience sampling are opportunity sampling and quota sampling. Opportunity sampling is a type of convenience sampling in which participants are selected based solely on their availability and willingness to participate. Quota sampling is structured in a way to ensure the sample is representative of the population by selecting from pre- determined subgroups with predetermined amounts of individuals from each subgroup (Bryman, 2016). In this paper, we relied on the opportunity sampling method in collecting the sample size. One-on-one interviews were conducted with students and considered as depth interviews. Which are unstructured interviews to get a better understanding of the student's responses to the questionnaire. (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009) posit its effectiveness as it can be useful in unique problem situations as well as collecting detailed understanding around complex behavior.

Duration and Length

The questionnaire responses and one-on-one interviews were conducted over a period of six months. The duration of the data collection ended in November 2022. The length of the interviews varied between 20 and 40 minutes, which was considered sufficient based on the questionnaire's number of questions. The software used for forming the questionnaire is Google forms, while the ones used for listing the responses and data analysis are Excel 365, and SPSS Statistics 29.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research questionnaire started with collecting the demographic characteristics of the participants including their age, and gender. Furthermore, the participants' buying behavior, and the frequency of their shopping online, and in- store. Going beyond and exploring the motives and reasons behind their responses through the one-on-one interviews.
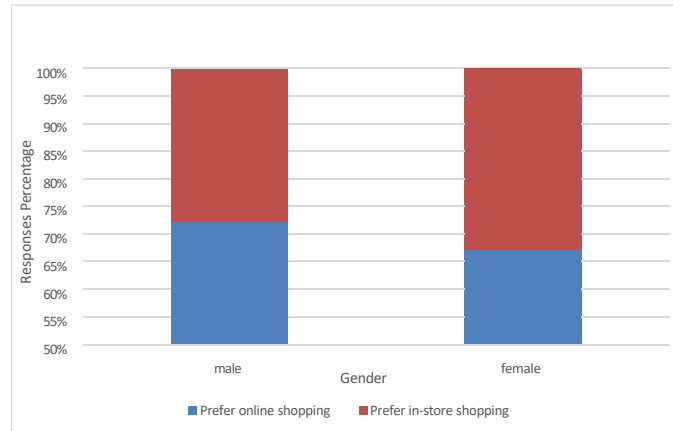
FIGURE 1. Online And In-Store Shopping Preferences

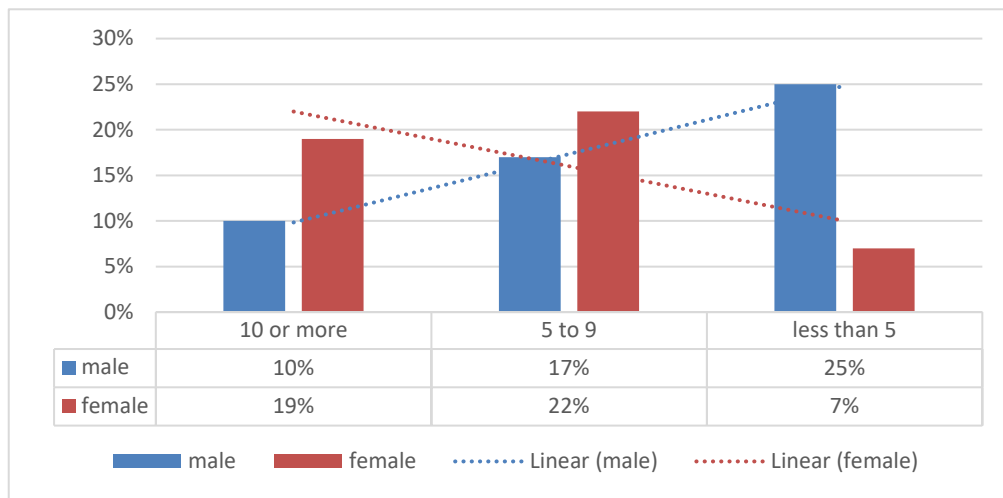**Demographic characteristics**

In this study, a total of 93 UK university students participated out of which twelve male students, and 15 female students fell in the age group of 18 to 24. 24 male students and 15 female students were in the age group of 25 to 35,and 18 male students and 9 female students were in the age group of 36 to 45. Making the percentage of female participants equivalent to 42%. The students were given four possible reasons about what most affects their buying behavior. 8% of the participants chose ethnicity, while 23% chose religion, but the two choices that were most chosen were education and economic conditions with percentages 34% and 35% respectively.

Shopping online and in-store preference and frequency

Findings show that 72% of the male participants prefer shopping online to in-store, while a less percentage of 67% of the female participants prefer shopping online as shown in Figure 1. During the depth interviews, the differences were that the male participants discussed their opinion of shopping as a leisure activity and part of the household chores. Based on the conducted conversations, they seemed more concerned with reaching their goal of purchasing the intended items without taking the time to enjoy many of the shopping experiences that come along with it. They also clarified that online shopping simplified this process by making it easier and more convenient. The female participants had the opposite opinion as they focus more on the experience, using words like fun and interesting to describe it. They also added that they take advantage of online shopping in offers and discounts presented online, adding that they go online before shopping in-store, so they be able to compare between stores and know which one to go to.

We concluded that they view shopping as not just a purchasing action, but a wholesome experience. The sample numbers show that a greater percentage of the male participants prefer to shop online while less percentage of female participants prefer online shopping, showing a difference of 5%. However, after computing a 90% confidence interval for the difference in proportions, it yields that it lies from approximately -10% to 20%. This implies that there is not enough evidence given the sample size, that can guarantee that the male percentage will always come higher than the female one, regarding preferring online shopping.

Comparing online and in-store shopping frequency of students. We divided the number of shopping per month into three categories, the participant can choose any of which as shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3. The first category is shopping ten times or more per month. 10% male students chose that answer regarding online shopping, and 6% male students chose that answer regarding in-store shopping per month. On the other hand, 19% female students had that choice regarding online shopping, and a less percentage of 16% female students had that choice regarding in-store shopping per month. The second category is shopping five to nine times per month. 17% male students had the choice regarding online shopping, while only 10% male students had that choice regarding in-store shopping. 22% female students choose that category regarding online shopping, and a bigger percentage of 27% female students had that choice regarding in-store shopping. The third and last category is shopping less than five times per month. 25% male students chose that answer regarding online shopping, and 34% male students had that choice.

	10 or more	5 to 9	less than 5
■ male	10%	17%	25%
■ female	19%	22%	7%

■ male   ■ female   ⋯ Linear (male)   ⋯ Linear (female)

FIGURE 2. Online Shopping Frequency

	10 or more	5 to 9	less than 5
■ male	6%	10%	34%
■ female	16%	27%	7%

Legend: male | female | Linear (male) | Linear (female)
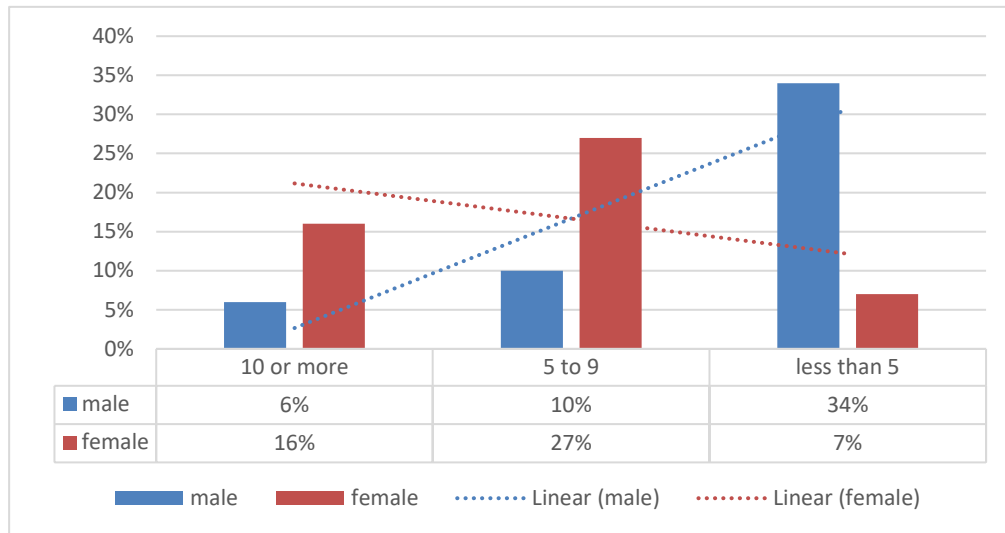
Regarding in-store shopping. 7% female students had that choice regarding online shopping, while approximately the same female student's percentage chose the same answer regarding in-store shopping. A study of the responses concluded that 80% of the male students did not break the barrier of shopping online seven times per month, and even fewer did so regarding in-store shopping. However, the same percentage of female students exceeded six times per month in both categories.

Regarding the time spent shopping per week Figure 4, the questionnaire it was classified into four categories. The first one was less than an hour. Approximately 17% male students had that response, while 6% female students chose the same. The second category was two to three hours of shopping per week. 20% male students had that choice, while 14% female students chose the same response. 8% male students and 20% female students chose the third answer which is four to five hours of shopping per week. The last category was six or more hours, 5% male students chose that answer, while 10% female students chose the same.

In the questionnaire the students were given a list of possible reasons that can be the motives of what drive them to prefer shopping online and were asked to rate each one choosing from strongly agree which is equivalent to five on the Likert scale down to strongly disagree, which is equivalent to one on the Likert scale.
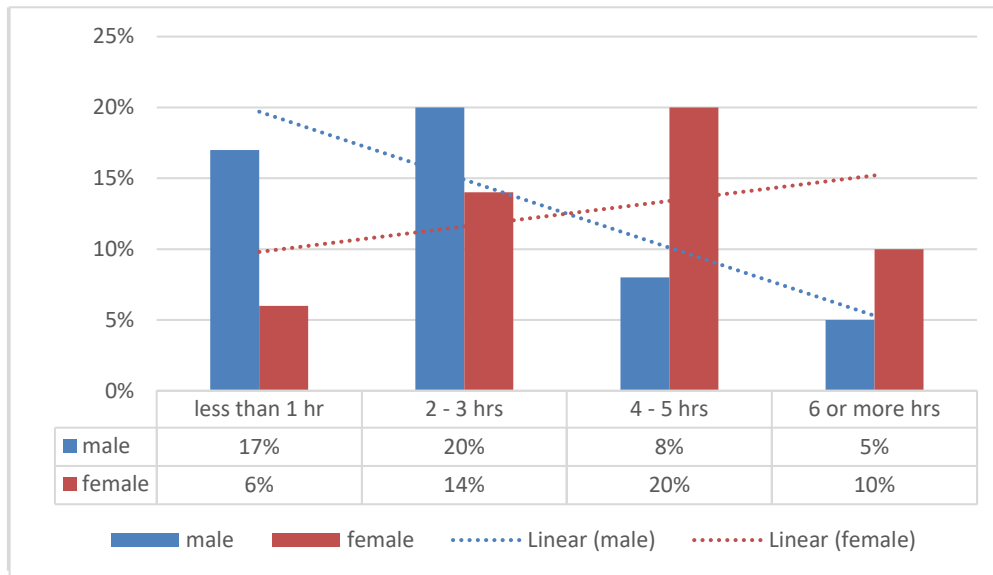
FIGURE 4. Shopping Time Per Week

Table 1 shows the results of a statistical analysis of responses to a questionnaire given to students about their reasons for preferring online shopping. The table includes the reasons for preferring online shopping, the lower limit (LL), the mean, the upper limit (UL), the sample standard deviation (S), and the margin of error.

Reasons for preferring online shopping	*LL*	*mean*	*UL*	*Sample STD(S)*	*Margin of error*
Time Saving	3.93	4.11	4.29	1.06	0.18
Ability to shop anytime	3.85	4.05	4.26	1.19	0.21
Can be considered risky	2.51	2.77	3.03	1.52	0.26
Wider variety of items	4.62	4.79	4.95	0.98	0.17
Hesitation in providing personal or f financial formation	2.71	2.96	3.20	1.43	0.25
Privacy and convenience while shopping	4.34	4.53	4.71	1.07	0.18
Easier to compare prices with more information available about each item	4.63	4.77	4.91	0.81	0.14
Ability to check feedback and reviews	4.66	4.81	4.97	0.91	0.16
You can have more shopping experience in−store than online	4.23	4.39	4.55	0.93	0.16
You prefer physically sensing the products before purchasing them	4.45	4.61	4.78	0.94	0.16
In−store shopping takes more time than online shopping	4.70	4.93	5	1.34	0.23

TABLE 1. Reasons for preferring online shopping

Based on the results shown in Table 1, it appears that the majority of students surveyed strongly agree that online shopping saves time and allows them to shop anytime. Additionally, a wide variety of items and the ability to compare prices with more information available about each item were also highly rated reasons for preferring online shopping. On the other hand, "Can be considered risky" and "hesitation in providing personal or financial information" are the least preferred reasons for

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preferring online shopping, as they have the lowest mean. It can also be observed that the sample standard deviation (S) is relatively low for most reasons, indicating that the majority of the students have similar opinions. However, for "Can be considered risky" and "hesitation in providing personal or financial information" the S is relatively high, indicating that there is more variation in opinions among the students. The margin of error is also relatively low for all reasons, indicating that the results are likely to be accurate.

CONCLUSION

Fast pacing improvements in technology have altered the nature of consumer buying behaviour (Dawson and Kim, 2010). Presently, online purchases tend to be immediate and the simplicity of the platform adds to the consumer's experience (Rezaei et al., 2016). The easier is the browsing through the online stores, lower will be the time and effort devoted by the consumer towards shopping (Castaneda et al., 2009). The present study adopts a quantitative research approach to study the consumer buying behaviour amongst University B students and aimed to identify the reasons that determine the consumer's online buying behaviour. Adopting a non-probability sampling design, the study includes 93 responses, collected through online and off-line questionnaire forms and seven one-on-one interviews with the respondents. Out of 93 respondents, 54 respondents were males while 39 respondents were females. The data was further divided on the basis of age group where, 12 males were in the age group of 18 to 24, 24 males in the age group of 25-35 and 18 males in the age group of 36 to 45. In the case of female respondents, 15 were in the age group of 18 to 24, 15 in the age group of 25-35 and 9 in the age group of 36 to 45. The data was collected over a span of six months, after which responses were analysed using Excel and SPSS.

According to the data, it was noted that higher proportion of males (72%) preferred to shop online as compared to females (67%). This was because males considered online shopping as a part of their household chores and online shopping made their task easier. In contrast to that, women considered it to be an experience and a leisure activity. The consumer behaviour is not determined by purchase decision alone, but also the experience associated with it (Schiffman, et al., 2008). As a result, traditional shopping gives the consumer an immediate satisfaction which is lagging in the case of online shopping (Jones et al., 2003), especially when the delivery is delayed (Verhagen & Dolen, 2011). In terms of frequency of online shopping, it was higher in the case of women as compared to men. It was noted that 19 per cent of the female respondents shopped online for 10 times or more as compared to 10 per cent of the male respondents. On the other hand, a significant proportion of male respondents (25%) as compared to females (7%) shopped online for less than five times. The previous researches have shown that shopping is mainly associated with women (Dholakia & Chiang, 2003). However, the recent researches state that it would be inaccurate to stereotype the shopping behaviours and therefore, there is a need to identify the male shopping behaviour in more detail (Otnes & McGrath, 2001).

The time spent on shopping is an important determinant to analyse the consumer buying behaviour. From the data, it was noted that on an average, female respondents spent more time in shopping as compared to male respondents. 17 per cent of the male respondents spent less than one hour on shopping as compared to 6 per cent of the female respondents. On the other hand, 5 per cent of the male respondents spent more than six hours on shopping and proportion was double for female respondents (10%). Higher amount of time can be linked to the buying pleasure developed because of the environment that is created at the time of shopping (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). This can induce the consumer to purchase the product impulsively (Vonkeman et al., 2017).

The respondents were asked about the reasons for preferring online shopping. Some of the most prominent responses were "time saving", "wider variety of items", and "Privacy and convenience while shopping". Madhavaram and Laverie (2004), too, stated that online purchasing saves time and effort as it is easier to browse through several options available by not leaving the comfort of home. It is worth noting that according to the result, the standard deviation in case of reasons such as "can be considered risky" and "hesitation in providing personal or financial information" is high implying the presence of significant variation in opinion amongst the respondents regarding online shopping. Low margin of error in the case of all reasons reflect on accuracy of data.

With respect to consumer buying behaviour, majority of the researches focus on the purchase in traditional stores with limited studies on the impact of growing online presence of stores on consumer's purchase decisions (Zhou and Wong, 2004). The present study opts towards addressing the gap by identifying the determinants that affect online buying behaviour amongst university students. Through the empirical evidence, the study adds to the methodology that could be used to comprehend the consumer's online buying behaviour by using a quantitative approach, rather than adopting the binaries in a quantitative study. This could help the researchers understand the purchase decisions through cultural, socio-economic, political, anthropological and several other lenses.

The study is also significant for the contemporary retailers, especially those using online platforms to enhance their sales. One of the prominent findings of the study was with respect to high amount of time spent on shopping by females. The results showed that marketers could adopt several strategies to encourage prospective buyers to purchase from the company. For instance, personalisation of website can help provide each consumer a shopping experience as per his/her preferences which can consequently enhance the sales made by the company (Chakraborty et al. 2003). Additionally, the visual appearance of the online store has a positive impact on the consumer's behaviour (Van Der Heijden, 2003). Therefore, marketers can focus on online display of the products to ensure maximum satisfaction to the consumers.

The study also makes a significant contribution in terms of the research methodology. It applied a quantitative approach to understand the consumer buying behaviour and identified several reasons that motivate the buyers to prefer online buying as compared to off-line shopping. Hwang and Kim (2007) highlighted that due to absence of human contact, the risk in online shopping is high. The present study, too, highlighted that risk associated with personal and financial information can affect the online buying behaviour. However, the high variation in the sample reflects a difference of opinion amongst the respondents.

In conclusion, for the future, an elaborative research can be conducted using a larger sample size that could reveal different facets of online buying behaviour amongst the university students. Additionally, the web-based retailers have brought about a significant change in the retailing industry (Hausman, 2000). The current trend of online retailing has minimised the spatial-temporal restrictions that are faced by the consumers in the traditional retail industry (Virvilaite et al., 2009). Thus, considering the exceeding use of online marketing techniques used by companies to attract consumers to purchase their products, it would be beneficial to include the idea of impulse buying in detail in the research.

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