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The Cameroonian Online Marketplace, An Exploratory Study of the Factors That Influence Online Shopping Attitude, The Case of the Town of Buea

Dr. Louis Mosake Njomo
University of Douala (Essec), Department of Marketing, Cameroon

Abstract

Interest in the world's online marketplace is growing. Not only are online consumers an important market in their own right, but some two billion internet users are transiting from buying products and services at physical establishments to online shops. Studies have revealed that the consumers' attitude towards online shopping is known as the main factor that affects e-shopping potential. Attitudinal issues are also thought to play a significant role in e-commerce adoption. That means that, through motivation and perception, attitudes are formed and consumers make decisions. The author conducted semi-structured depth interviews with 56 internet users in the town of Buea exploring their attitude towards online shopping. The findings provide new insights into the reasons why online shopping in Cameroon is quiet underdeveloped. The findings reveal that internet insecurity, lack of internet infrastructure, poor online customer service, high e-prices, poor product characteristics and online shopping inconvenience strongly contribute to unfavourable attitude towards online shopping in Cameroon.
Keywords: Online shopping; Attitude: Online security; Convenience; Customer service; Buea; Internet infrastructure; E-prices.

1. Introduction

With the upsurge of internet penetration within the entire marketing arena in the past few decades, consumers have sought the need to embark on online transactions. Online transactions or shopping is defined as the way and manner customers make use of the internet in search of information relating to a particular product, and to make trade-offs with the intensions of finalizing a purchase transaction (Armstrong and Kotler, 2000). Growth of online shopping has been characterized by strong consumer demands and the increasing number and type of goods available. Physical stores are moving at least part of their companies online in order to cut costs. In Nigeria and other African countries, a growing generation of young, internet-savvy individuals has embraced the new online technology. E-commerce activities have largely expanded in countries like Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya both due to the proliferation of mobile phones and availability of faster internet networks. However, in Cameroon, despite the increasing growth of internet users, the number of users of online shopping platforms is still far below that of other African countries like Nigeria, talk less of reaching the worlds average of 30 per cent. Cameroonians attitude towards online shopping has been described as largely unfavourable. As a result, there are very few online shops in Cameroon. In this study the researcher has examined the nature of Cameroonians attitude towards online shopping and the factors that influence their attitude. The study argues that, knowledge and understanding of the factors that influence the attitude of Cameroonians toward online shopping may enable the government and online businesses to develop measures aimed at improving the attitude of Cameroonians toward shopping online. It can also help marketing managers predict the online shopping intention and evaluate the future growth of online commerce in Cameroon.

1.1. Research Questions
In this study, the following research questions have been answered:
1. How does internet insecurity affect consumers' attitude towards online shopping?
2. Is there a relationship between lack of internet infrastructure and consumers attitude toward online shopping?
3. How do poor product/service characteristics influence consumers 'attitude toward online shopping?
4. How does internet inconvenience influence consumers' attitude toward online shopping?
5. How does high e-prices influence consumers' attitude toward online shopping?
Is there a relationship between poor customer service and consumers' attitude toward online shopping?

2. Research Aims and Objectives
This study examined the factors that influence consumers' attitude towards online shopping in Cameroon. The following objective enabled the realization of the aims.
1. To examine the relationship between internet insecurity and consumers' attitude towards online shopping.
2. To explore the relationship between lack of internet infrastructure and consumers attitude toward online shopping.
3. To establish the relationship between poor product/ service characteristics and consumers' attitude toward online shopping.

4. To explore the relationship between inconvenience and consumers attitude toward online shopping.

5. To discover the relationship between high e-prices and consumers' attitude toward online shopping.

6. To determine the relationship between poor customer service and consumers' attitude toward online shopping.

2.1. The Significance of the Study

It is expected that this study may do the following:

1. Enable online shops to know and understand consumers' attitude towards online shopping in Cameroon.

2. It may enable online shops to know and understand consumers' perception of online shops in Cameroon.

3. It may enable the online shops to know and understand their shortcomings.

4. It may enable online shops to establish measures to overcome their shortcomings.

5. It may enable online shops to know and understand factors that influence consumers' attitudes towards online shopping in Cameroon

6. It may provide an indication of how far consumer attitude as a concept has been reflected in online shopping behaviours in Cameroon

7. The study may introduce a methodology for the evaluation of online consumer attitudes in Cameroon.

8. It study may be used as a reference resources by other researchers working in the area of online shopping in Cameroon.

2.2. Conceptual Model

This study is set within the framework of factors that influence consumers online shopping attitude pulled from a wealth of literature. The framework provides a lens to understand the complexity of consumer online attitudes and the drivers that contribute to consumers' online shopping attitude. The framework argues that consumers underlying objectives of visiting an online shop will have an effect on their attitude of purchase on the shop. Thus understanding the online consumers' attitude plays a central role in e-tailer ability to design the online shop. The drivers of the framework include:

2.3. Convenience

One of the most obvious benefits of online shopping which cannot be overlooked is convenience. One of the most enjoyable conveniences of online shopping which is enjoyed by many is the ability to shop for products or services at a time which is convenient for the consumer. Convenience was an early driver of consumer adoption of ecommerce, and new survey data indicates that ease of use remains the critical factor when consumers make the decision to shop online (Nielsen, 2005). Again, convenience is measured as and when customers make use of the internet to make purchases. Online shoppers stand the chance of enjoying multiple forms of convenience in the form of less physical effort, flexibility in terms of shopping, lenience in responding to promotions as well as advertisement, and finally accompanied by some user friendly websites (Pavlou, 2003). Over again, online shoppers intend to recommend others on particular websites with discounts on sales and other information on some particular websites which induce consumers' willingness to purchase online. Consumer decision making is significantly influenced by both the speed and ease with which consumers can contact retail outlets (Bhatnagar and Ghose, 2004b). Many consumers turn to the Internet to reduce the effort associated with making a decision. While shopping consumers spend time and effort to complete multiple tasks and since today's customer is more time-starved than ever, it is appropriate to consider the benefits of providing online shopping convenience. Online convenience has been one of the principal promoters of customer's predisposition to adopt online purchasing (Davis, 1989).

2.4. E-Prices

One of the main factors that influence customers at the time of buying a product is the price. Customers constantly try to find the most attractive offer, which meets all the requirements they seek at the best possible price (Bhimalingam and Shrivastava, 2008).. But is it the only thing customers have in mind when making an online purchase? From the retailers point of view, the most widespread belief is that the absolute value of the price is the only factor that interests the customers, that the cheaper the product, the better. But the truth is that there are elements that influence the perception of the price before the decision to buy online (Shih, 2004). The key is in the image that the user has of an ecommerce through their prices and competitor´s prices. In the digital environment there are 3 factors that directly influence this perception: the discounts and promotions, the value for money and the transparency of the ecommerce.

2.4.1. Discounts and Promotions

Always be the cheapest or to have the best offers? It is important to know from the outset what position the brand wants to achieve with its pricing strategy. In many cases, a timely offer from an online store that has become a reference for the user can be much more attractive than the 'always lower' price of other ecommerce (Shim and Eastlick, 2001).

2.4.2. Value for Money

Offer the lowest price or show the best quality-price? These two options do not have to be at odds with each other, although experience shows that an excessively low price of a product can generate mistrust, especially in users

who land for the first time in an ecommerce. In addition, if these users have already purchased similar products in other online stores, they will have a price reference and will doubt the large difference, unless the price has a reasonable explanation as a wholesale price or a specific promotion (Shwu-Ing, 2003)

The customer seeks maximum savings, but does not leave aside the confidence factor or the quality of the product. And to verify the value for money they will use previous experiences, tracking competitor´s prices and comments and ratings of other customers.

2.5. E- Commerce Transparency

The honesty of ecommerce in terms of its prices is a determining factor in the user's perception before making a purchase decision. Stores that are looking to increase sales with very low-priced deals that then skyrocket at the time of payment are not the model to follow. In fact, this type of strategy is one of the most rejected by potential buyers, not because the final price of the product may seem very high, but because they feel cheated by the brand (Bhatnagar and Ghose, 2004b).

A practical solution is to break down the prices on the product sheet itself, indicating, for example, shipping costs. They can also be included directly in the final price, or you can clarify in a conspicuous place what the expenses associated with the purchase are: by the shipment, by the selected payment method, etc. (Strauss and Frost, 1999). Shoppers not only get competitive pricing information but also product reviews and site reviews to help with their decision of what and where to buy online. Many online stores waive sales tax charges or shipping costs to entice shoppers to make an online purchase. Also, reputable sites offer toll-free numbers for customers who do not want to post their personal information and credit card numbers online (Burke, 2002).

2.6. E- Security

Security means many things to many people and different things in different contexts. It can be the expectation of anonymity, the expectation of retaining one's privacy, control over personal information, and the expectation of confidentiality. Security is one of the issues practitioners frequently associate with the success or failure of online ventures (Chen and Chang, 2003). One of the most common worries with creating efficient and trustworthy on-line commerce concerns the security of financial transactions which occurs over the network. The concerns are not merely about security of value, but also about the trust in information society. Transaction security and customer data safety are main concerns of online customers purchasing products and services. Most e-tailers" sites have privacy policies and publish security statement, in order to relieve consumers' concerns about privacy and security in their transactions (Burke, 2002). Research has shown that the intention to purchase products is inversely related to the amount of perceived risk associated with the purchase (Mohd *et al.*, 2006) In this study, security concerns are limited to the concerns consumers have in regard to companies' possession of personal information, Payment term, receipt of goods by time & place and privacy of process (Delhagen, 1997).

2.7. E- Infrastructure

Critical Internet infrastructure is a collective term for all hardware and software systems that transmits and receives information from a variety of different systems and networks. There are many components involved in internet infrastructure, including networks, servers, data centers, storage devices, and more. In some areas of the globe, the hardware components of the internet infrastructure may be localized. However, the network infrastructure crosses the entire globe (Cheung and Lee, 2003). This means that the internet is accessible in any location where local hardware is available to tap into it. In this study, infrastructure for internet concerns are limited to the hurdles consumers have in regard to access to internet in such as access to internet, availability, cost of internet connection, internet knowledge and practice (Moe, 2003).

2.8. E-Product/Service Characteristics

Product and service related factors are one of the key factors influencing purchase behaviour. Product Characteristics are attributes that can be added to the product definition to extend the description of each product. Examples of characteristics are *Size*, *Color*, *Quality*, *Shape* or *Weight*. These characteristics can be used later to filter or search products. Once the definition of the characteristics are created these can be assigned to a product and then create other products (Rowley, 2000).

2.8.1. These Characteristics Include

Physical Look: this refers to factors color, shape and size, in as much detail as possible.

Purpose: This refers to value of the product. In other words in what way does a particular product make the life of the consumer easier, more fun, etc…?

Craftsmanship: The product needs to be made well. It should be durable so that it will last. It should come with directions for use and warranty information, if applicable. A consumer will need this information to determine the total quality of the product.

Price: The price of a product is very important. A consumer wants to get the very most for their money. A business needs to make sure that the price is fair if they want to get their share of the market. Once they figure out a decent price, they can work with sales, promotions and discounts in order to entice customers to buy from them.

Comparing criteria: This refers to how different a product is in the market. A business should be able to tell their potential customers why their product is the best. It should try to find out as much as possible about competitors

and be able to state clearly why the particular product is better than competitors' offerings (Chiang and Dholakia, 2003).

2.9. E-Customer Service

Customer service is the act of taking care of the customer's needs by providing and delivering professional, helpful, high quality service and assistance before, during, and after the customer's requirements are met (Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1989). Customer service is meeting the needs and desires of any customer. Some characteristics of good customer service include:

1. *Promptness:* Promises for delivery of products must be on time. Delays and cancellations of products should be avoided.
2. *Politeness*: Politeness is almost a lost art. Saying 'hello,' 'good afternoon,' 'sir,' and 'thank you very much' are a part of good customer service. For any business, using good manners is appropriate whether the customer makes a purchase or not.
3. *Professionalism:* All customers should be treated professionally, which means the use of competence or skill expected of the professional. Professionalism shows the customer they're cared for.
4. *Personalization:* Using the customer's name is very effective in producing loyalty. Customers like the idea that whom they do business with knows them on a personal level (Schlosser, 2003).

With the advent of computers and World Wide Web, customer service through chats and e-mails has become common. Customers' expectations have changed. They expect to interact with a brand through a multitude of digital channels. As a result, businesses and organizations spanning across various industries and sectors—from healthcare to retail—are taking a digital approach to their customer care and support efforts (Fenech, 2001). Customers and users want to access online services through a variety of platforms, including web browsers and apps, all from a mobile device. Customers and users also expect their experiences to be consistent, and want the flexibility and convenience of migrating between platforms (Forrester, 2006).

In summary, in order to implement a successful digital e-care system, keep the following in mind:

Intuitive – Is your digital e-Care system easy to use and navigate? Is it functional? Is it easy to find information among menus?

Simplicity – A simple yet effective user interface is crucial for operability and functionality. Sometimes building a digital user interface with all the "bells and whistles" is unnecessary. Simplicity is best not only for your users' sanity levels but also to keep internal technical support and maintenance costs low.

Consistency – As we mentioned above, customers and users want to be able to access online services and find the information they know is there seamlessly. Therefore, consistency is key. Refrain from making updates or advancements to your digital e-Care system that are unnecessary.

Value – It's important to remember that your digital e-care system must be designed to meet customers' and users' needs, and must be flexible and adaptable as those needs change. Users must see the utmost value from your online services, and must feel in control.

Touching upon each of the above points will help increase value of your digital e-Care system for your users. While great customer service is especially important for businesses that have a strong financial incentive to retain their customers, the bar has risen across all industries, and customers are rewarding businesses that keep pace. This shift has, in turn, evolved support into a revenue driver. Customers are, without a doubt, the very focal point of an E-commerce venture. Customer Support has to be the modus operandi. Customer service at the very least needs to be the point of contact for all customer enquiries, whether that is before, during or after a sale has made. They should answer questions about the product, the stock, price, delivery time and issues with the product (Shang *et al.*, 2005).

3. Research Methodology

The sample comprised 56 residents of Buea, the headquarter of the South West region. The author chose Buea because he was familiar with the local culture and language and could establish a good working relationship with the respondents. The author recruited a diversity of respondents at random locations and times to capture the diversity of the local subsistence community. Interviewing points included homes, retail stores, markets, cultural associations and churches

The author conducted semi-structured depth interviews at a time and location convenient to the respondents, giving assurances of anonymity and confidentiality prior to beginning interviews to develop rapport and trust. The author conducted interviews in Pidgin English, the major spoken language in the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon. Respondents answered questions in their own words at a convenient pace, usually completing interviews in 45 minutes.

3.1. Analysis

The author took care to not allow own personal values and opinions to influence the interviews or analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim from digital recordings. The author relied on theory and the data, generating codes iteratively through multiple readings of the transcripts, using a deductive and inductive approach and consulting to reach agreements on interpretation.

3.2. Interpretation

The author reports interpretation of the data by examining how the following variables influenced their attitude toward e-shopping; Security, internet infrastructure, convenience, e-prices, e-product/service characteristics, and e-customer service.

3.3. Security

Security was one of the main concerns of the respondents. Majority of the respondents reported that online shopping sites were not safe. For instance, Mr. Ekole, aged 45, a secondary school teacher said, *I once carried out a transaction online and later on discovered that money was withdrawn from my bank account by an unknown person.*

In the same vein, Mr Raymond, a tax inspector remarked *after a transaction online I now frequently receive emails about products from people I do not know. How they got my email address is what I can't explain.*

3.4. Internet Infrastructure

When respondents were asked whether internet infrastructure constituted one of the reasons for not shopping online, majority of them indicated that it was one of the reasons. For example Mr Eta, a banker, aged 32, said *internet connectivity is very slow in Cameroon. It takes a very long time for an online transaction to go through. It very much discourages me from shopping online.*

Similarly Mrs Ngoe, an insurer, aged 29 reported, *internet is very expensive in Cameroon. As result, one cannot afford to shop online.*

3.5. Convenience

Respondents were also asked if shopping online in Cameroon was convenient enough. According to the findings, most of the respondents declared that shopping online in Cameroon was not convenient. For example Mr Shirley, a lecturer aged 32, said online shopping websites are not user friendly. *They do not provide needed information about products and the transaction process very time consuming.*

Equally Mr Stone reported that *payment for a product requires that you have a bank account.*

3.6. E-Prices

According most of the respondents, high e-prices contributed to their unfavourable attitude towards online shopping. For example Miss Christable a trader, aged 28, said *compared to prices of same products at physical stores the prices of products of online shops are expensive.*

Also, Mrs Nasake reported *online promotion prices are not honest. I ended up buying a product at the same prices I would have bought the same product at a physical store*

3.6. E-Customer Service

When respondents were asked to evaluate the level of customer service of online shops in Cameroon, majority reported customer service was poor. Mrs Jacobs, a bakery worker, aged 35 said *online shops take very long to get back to you when you make a request for information. At times they don't get back to you. In addition, after a purchase the shops do not get back to you to find out whether you are satisfied with the product.*

Also Mr Nageri, a civil servant, aged 41 reported *online shops never give you feedback on your complain. They don't even answer their phones*

3.7. E-Product Characteristics

Majority of the respondents reported that the characteristics of e products were not the best hence limiting them from shopping online. One of the major concerns was the quality of the product. For example, Mrs Petersons, a consultant, aged 39 said I *bought a set of chaffing diches online. I was shocked at the quality of what was delivered. The quality was the most inferior of chaffing dishes I have ever seen.*

In the same vein, Mr Rigobert an Electrician reported I *paid for a home theatre system online; the size of what was delivered was very small. Online, the pictured portrayed looked big.*

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The world is moving fast and one of the greatest reasons behind the demand of online shopping is busy lifestyle and economic growth. Online Shopping is different from Traditional Shopping in many ways. Product descriptions, gifts, home delivery, payment modes, etc. are easy to access online now a days. This has made it important for us to improve our understanding of the behaviour of online shoppers which has been a relatively neglected topic in consumer research. Online markets are important in their own right, with considerable spending power. In the current research, the researcher explores the factors that influence the consumer attitude towards online shopping in Cameroon. The study argues that, despite an increase in the usage rate of the internet, most Cameroonian internet users prefer shopping at physical establishments than online establishments. Contrary to traditional expectations that most internet users would prefer to shop online than in physical shops, the depth interviews with 56 internet users in Buea revealed that most internet users in Cameroon prefer physical shops that online shops.

A significant finding concerns the level of online security. The study revealed that internet users would shop online if measures are put in place to make transactions safe and secure. Online businesses in Cameroon should take customers' security and privacy seriously by putting in place measures to secure personal information of customers.

The study also recommends that online shoppers should learn about online security and privacy and look for ways to keep their personal information safe such as encrypting their information

This study equally found that lack of internet infrastructure was one of the major contributions of low online shopping in Cameroon. The current research suggests that the state and internet service providers should improve on internet infrastructure in Cameroon. Measures such as enabling access to the internet, internet availability, reducing cost of internet connection and encouraging internet knowledge and practice should be put in place.

Contrary to the believe that the primary reason for shopping online is convenience, the current research found that most internet users found shopping online in Cameroon to be inconvenient. Based on the findings, it is safe to conclude that the inconveniences experienced during online shopping is a cause for low online shopping in Cameroon. This study recommends that online businesses in Cameroon should put in place measures to enhance the experiences of their customers such as providing reliable payment systems, accurate and reliable information, assortment of products, availability of products and speedy delivery of products.

We need to also understand how online shoppers perceive customer service of online shops in Cameroon. The study found that most respondents had a negative perception of online customer service. It is safe to conclude that poor customer service is one of the causes of low online shopping in Cameroon. The study recommends that online retail establishments should improve on their customer service. This can be done by conducting a study to know about the challenges faced by customers.

In the category of e-prices, findings indicate that most of the respondents reported that high e- prices of products and services online contributed to low patronage of online shops. The current study suggests that online retailers should ensure that the prices of their products are market related. In addition, promotions and discounts should be transparent.

Finally another significant finding concerns the characteristics of products sold online. The study found that most of the respondents were not happy with the characteristics of products found at online shops. Based on the findings, it is safe to conclude that poor product characteristics are one of the causes of low online shopping in Cameroon. This study recommends that online retailers should ensure that the characteristics of products and services marketed on online platforms conform to the needs of the target market. This can be done by researching on the needs of the market segments targeted by retailers.

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