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Online Retailer's Understanding of Consumers While Offering the Product: A Narrative Study

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ABSTRACT

Prior research in the field of online retail has predominantly adopted a consumer-centric perspective, primarily rooted in the positivist paradigm. While these studies have shed light on consumer needs, values, website design, and the role of content, there has been a notable dearth of literature that explores the online retailer's narrative, their lived experiences, and their interactions while offering products to consumers. This study seeks to address this gap by employing a narrative approach to data collection and analysis. In this study, a narrative approach was employed to understand the experiences and perspectives of online retailers. Qualitative data collection methods were used to delve into the stories and experiences of these retailers, going beyond the traditional consumer-focused investigations. The findings of this research reveal intriguing insights into the practices of online retailers. It becomes evident that online retailers may, at times, hide or manipulate information to serve their vested interests, particularly when it comes to designing content for product offerings. Their narratives indicate the challenges they face in cultivating trust among consumers, retaining their customer base, and providing satisfactory after-sales services. However, online retailers are not passive actors; they employ a variety of strategies to effectively communicate product attributes and enhance customer retention. This research sheds light on the complex interplay of interests, strategies, and challenges within the online retail space, from the perspective of the retailers themselves.

Keywords: *Content design, Trust, product attributes, Customer retention*

Introduction

In discussions with a friend employed as a manager at XYZ.com (name changed), it became apparent that many online retailers tout the excellence of their products and services, highlighting user-friendly and interactive websites. However, when probed about the foundation of their offerings and how consumers perceive their engagement on e-platforms, my friend was perplexed. In my observations within my office and neighborhood, I've noted a significant number of people who are internet-savvy, using smartphones and gadgets, yet hesitating to make purchases from online retailers. This hesitation, I believe, is closely tied to consumers' perceived value of online retailers and their offerings, and how these factors influence their purchase intentions.

The Internet has revolutionized the way businesses market their products in this digital era of the twenty-first century (Mukharjee & Nath, 2007). Online shopping platforms have proliferated over the past decade, becoming a favored method of offering products to consumers. The growing number of internet users, coupled with advancements in

technology, has led to a surge in online business activities, intensifying competition among firms operating in the digital sphere (Vazquez & Xu, 2009; Limbu, Wolf, & Lunsford, 2012). Online shopping has redefined the traditional shopping experience, eliminating physical barriers and enabling buyers and sellers to transact without in-person interactions.

However, online shopping's practicality and convenience are not without challenges. Security concerns regarding digital information and its potential misuse are prominent (Kim, Kim, & Kandampully, 2009). Moreover, in the virtual world of the internet, customers cannot physically inspect or touch products before purchase, which can lead to uncertainty. Despite the convenience, there are numerous obstacles that hinder full-scale adoption of online transactions by businesses and consumers.

While global online shopping has advanced significantly, Nepal appears to be in the early stages of adopting the e-business concept. This lag may be attributed to a lack of technological adaptation and an understanding of the psychological factors influencing consumer behavior. Both tangible and intangible barriers constrain the full expansion of online business and trading. Nepal stands to benefit from embracing e-business, as it can eliminate physical barriers and constraints typically associated with traditional purchasing patterns.

Nonetheless, the adoption of online trading and e-business in Nepal faces its own set of challenges, particularly related to technological adaptation. The psychological aspect of consumer behavior is another pivotal consideration for businesses. Numerous psychological factors come into play, influencing the dynamic nature of consumer behavior.

In essence, the landscape of online retail is multifaceted, shaped by technology, security concerns, and psychological factors. While Nepal is in the early stages of this transformation, the potential benefits of embracing e-business are significant. Addressing the challenges posed by technological adaptation and understanding the

psychological aspects of consumer behavior are crucial steps toward realizing the full potential of online trading in the country.

Problem Statement

The existing body of research has extensively delved into the factors influencing consumers' online purchase intentions and the decision-making processes from a consumer-centric perspective. However, there is a notable gap in our understanding when it comes to the viewpoint of online retailers. Little attention has been given to exploring what online retailers think and perceive regarding the behavior and psychology of online consumers, their decision-making processes, and how these insights shape their approach to offering products and designing websites.

Prior studies have emphasized the need for a deeper comprehension of the retailer's perspective, particularly in the context of Nepal, where this aspect remains relatively unexplored. It has become evident that consumers' purchase decisions are intricately linked to how online retailers present their products and services and engage with consumers through online platforms. Therefore, there is an urgent need to uncover the thoughts, actions, and behaviors of online retailers in response to consumers while offering products and services in the Nepalese marketplace.

Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to investigate and gain insights into the perspective of online retailers. Specifically, this research aims to understand how online retailers perceive and interact with their consumers when presenting products on e-platforms.

Literature Review

A comprehensive examination of the existing literature reveals crucial insights into the dynamics of online retailing from both consumer and online retailer perspectives. Siddiqui, O'malley, McColl, and Birtwistle (2003) emphasized the differences in retail and consumer perceptions of fashion websites, indicating that retailers often struggle to

comprehend consumer needs but remain content with their online offerings. Bevan and Murphy (2001) outlined strategies for online retailers to create value for consumers by consistently developing and enhancing online offerings and formats.

Kim and Stoel (2004) highlighted the pivotal role of store image and perceived value in shaping purchase intentions, with consumers who perceive higher value demonstrating greater willingness to purchase and exhibit loyalty. Gan, Limsombunchai, Clemes, and Weng (2005) and Stonewall (1992) provided various definitions and dimensions of "value," underlining its significance in consumer judgments and preferences.

Sweeney and Soutar (2001) offered an overall assessment of perceived value as a crucial factor in evaluating product attributes and performance in alignment with consumer goals. Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2001) differentiated between goal-oriented and experiential online shoppers, who seek utilitarian and hedonic value, respectively. Vliet and Pota (2001) classified online retailers based on their corporate origins, while Newholm, McGoldrick, Keeling, Macaulay, and Doherty (2004) highlighted the importance of tailoring online offerings to different product categories.

Constantinides, Romero, and Boria (2008) recommended social media strategies for online retailers, suggesting passive and active uses of social media platforms to enhance customer experience and product customization. Kim and Lennon (2010) explored the causal relationships among purchase intention, risk, satisfaction, and intention to revisit, shedding light on the impact of available information on purchase-related factors.

Akroush and Al-Debei (2015) emphasized the role of website image, reputation, relative advantage, and trust in shaping online shopping attitudes. Tandon, Kiran, and Sah (2017) underscored the positive impact of perceived usefulness and website functionality on customer satisfaction. Rahman, Khan, and Iqbal (2018) delved into motivation and barriers to online purchasing in a South Asian context, highlighting the significance of trust and privacy concerns.

However, it is noteworthy that prior studies have predominantly taken a consumer-centric perspective, largely grounded in the positivist paradigm. Insufficient attention has been devoted to understanding online retailers' perspectives, experiences, and insights. This study seeks to address this gap, guided by a post-positivism approach, with the aim of unraveling how online retailers perceive and interact with consumers and create value in the online marketplace.

Theoretical Review

There were some theories that reviewed and found is suitable to explain this phenomenon. Like, Signaling theory explains that one party credibly conveys some information about itself to another party (Spence, M. 1973). While, it is realized that based on Classical conditioning theory, the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) paradigm adapted by (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001) is most appropriate and well explained this phenomenon. In context of online retailing environmental stimuli (S) is defined as "the sum total of all the cues that are visible and audible to the online shopper" (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001). Consumers' internal states of affect and cognition are represented by Organism (O). In online shopping consumers' affective and cognitive internal states towards website affect consumer responses (R) during site visits, like approach or avoidance behaviors (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). In this context, the information/message that online retailers tried to communicate is considered as stimuli (S), internal states of affect and cognition are considered as organism (O) and responses towards website/social media/retailers offering are considered as response (R).

Methodology

This study delves into the lived experiences of online retailers as they offer products in an online platform. Notably, existing literature in this domain has primarily been approached from the consumer's perspective, heavily influenced by the positivist paradigm, with studies exploring factors such as purchase intention, satisfaction, and perceived value (Kim and Lennon, 2010; Gan et al., 2005;

Tandon et al., 2017). While some literature does exist from a qualitative perspective, these studies tend to focus on consumer needs, the concept of value, website design, the role of content, and product categories (Bevan and Murphy, 2001; Newholm et al., 2004; Vliet and Pota, 2001).

However, the narratives and experiences of online retailers have been significantly underrepresented in the existing body of work. Therefore, this study adopted a narrative approach for data collection, aiming to address this underexplored aspect of online retailing.

The study selected two online retailers as the primary participants, both specializing in clothing products. Clothing products were chosen as the focal point because, unlike other product categories, consumers do not have the opportunity to physically touch, feel, or try on the products when shopping online. The selection of participants was purposeful, with a focus on information richness. Out of a pool of 10 online retailers, two participants were chosen for the study, one from Kathmandu and one from Lalitpur, as online business predominantly thrives in urban areas of Nepal.

The researcher engaged in informal discussions with the online retailers at the outset of the fieldwork, followed by a series of interviews, typically comprising a minimum of three rounds for each participant. Additionally, the researcher observed the online presence of the selected retailers across various digital platforms, including web pages and social media. This multifaceted approach was employed to capture a comprehensive understanding of how online retailers offer their products in the digital realm.

The data collected was meticulously analyzed through transcription, coding, and categorization using MAXQDA-20, ultimately leading to the identification of pertinent themes. The final transcriptions were submitted to the participants for approval, ensuring their consent and maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants by using pseudonyms in the report.

The research adhered to the ethical guidelines of the university, securing informed consent from the participants, and upholding the principles of confidentiality and secrecy to protect the participants' identities and experiences. The narrative approach was carefully selected as the research methodology, aligning it with the research questions, and the study's strengths and weaknesses were thoughtfully considered in the context of the research questions.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study, which delves into the online retailers' lived experiences as they offer products in the online platform, were based on the narratives and insights shared by two online retailers, Acharyaji and Shristi (names changed), who primarily dealt with clothing products. Both retailers had distinct practices and strategies, and their experiences reflected the themes developed in the study.

Practices of Content Design

Siddiqui, O'malley, McColl, and Birtwistle (2003) argued that online retailers tend to prioritize their interests over consumer needs when designing website content. Acharyaji's approach involved prominently displaying prices and essential product information to filter out disinterested customers efficiently. In this way, they could focus on potential customers who were genuinely interested. Conversely, Shristi opted not to reveal prices intentionally. Their strategy revolved around encouraging direct customer interaction, aiming to build personal relationships. Both retailers acknowledged that while they personally addressed customer inquiries, they did not prioritize addressing such concerns during the content design process. This practice implied that content design was often manipulated to serve the retailer's interests rather than the customer's needs.

Online retailers in Nepal tend to provide only the most critical information while designing and offering products on the online platform. This information is often tailored to the retailer's perception and interests rather than addressing

customers' needs and expectations. It is evident that retailers manipulate information to serve their vested interests in content design. This approach aligns with the findings of Siddiqui, O'malley, McColl, and Birtwistle (2003), who noted that retailers are often less attentive to consumer needs and more satisfied with their online offerings.

Generating Trust

Rahman, Khan, and Iqbal (2018) emphasized the significance of trust in e-commerce, with a good reputation being pivotal for a company's success. Additionally, authors like Bevan and Murphy (2001) and Kim and Stoel (2004) stressed the importance of continually adding value for customers. In this study, both online retailers acknowledged the considerable challenge of building trust, given the absence of physical presence in the digital ecosystem, which triggers skepticism about authenticity, safety, and product reliability, especially for clothing items. To instill trust, both retailers adopted the practice of maintaining highly interactive relationships with past customers. They solicited feedback and stayed in touch with customers to inform them about new products and special offers. Both retailers stressed the importance of transparency and honesty in building trust.

Both online retailers face difficulties in generating the trust they desire from their customers. Trust is essential for creating value, as emphasized by Bevan and Murphy (2001), who encourage online retailers to continually develop and enhance their online offerings to foster trust and value creation. The findings indicate that, in the Nepalese context, online retailers struggle to establish the level of trust required to create value for their customers.

Product Attributes Aspects

Kim and Lennon (2010) examined how the level of information available on a website influences purchase intention, risk, satisfaction, and intention to revisit. Retailers had differing views on displaying product attributes. Acharyaji, who sold branded products, chose not to display extensive product attributes, assuming that consumers held

a positive impression of branded products and primarily based their decisions on the brand itself. They believed that detailing product attributes would not serve a significant purpose. In contrast, Shristi, dealing with unbranded items, also opted not to emphasize detailed product attributes. Most customers were more interested in product features like color, print, and design, rather than detailed attribute descriptions. Both types of retailers faced challenges in convincing customers, particularly when selling clothing items that customers couldn't physically trial, touch, or feel.

Online retailers in Nepal apply different approaches in communicating product attributes, depending on the product categories they offer. Acharyaji focuses on niche marketing, selling branded items, while Shristi adopts mass marketing, selling unbranded products. This aligns with Newholm et al.'s (2004) perspective, which asserts that the design of online offers should align with product categories, as different categories require distinct levels of development and types of trust. Additionally, Kim and Lennon (2010) argue that the way retailers communicate product attributes can influence customers' intention to revisit. In the Nepalese context, online retailers seem to be aware of the importance of their communication strategies regarding product attributes.

Customer Retention Strategies

Kim and Lennon (2010) demonstrated that the level of information available on a website and the retailer's communication influenced customers' intention to revisit. Acharyaji, selling branded products, employed technical strategies, analyzing individual customer preferences to tailor their product displays. They also provided prior notifications about discounts and offered special deals to returning customers. Shristi, selling unbranded items, opted for more personalized customer interactions, encouraging customers to share pictures of themselves wearing the products. This practice created emotional attachments and strong relationships between the retailer and customers. Both retailers offered various discounts, coupons, and special sales to enhance customer

retention. They recognized the challenges in retaining customers in the competitive online business environment.

Both online retailers employ strategies to provide a sense of customer delight and personalized service, reflecting the recommendations of Kim and Lennon (2010). Their strategies differ, with Acharyaji employing technical approaches, such as analyzing individual customer preferences and notifying customers of discounts and new products. In contrast, Shristi focuses on building emotional connections with customers by encouraging them to share pictures of themselves wearing the products. This approach is viewed as a way to create strong relationships between retailers and customers. Both retailers also offer discounts, coupons, and special sales to enhance customer retention.

Providing After-Sales Service

Bevan and Murphy (2001) suggested that after-sales service could create value for consumers and increase satisfaction. In this study, both retailers, dealing with clothing products, offered similar after-sales services to support their customers. They had an exchange policy, primarily for reasons related to product size, color, design dissatisfaction, or delivery of damaged products. Customers could contact the retailers directly to request an exchange. However, refunds were not offered; instead, the same-priced product within the range would be exchanged. Both retailers acknowledged that handling such situations could be challenging and sometimes resulted in awkward scenarios, despite their good intentions.

After-sales service is a fundamental way for online retailers to create value for their customers and increase satisfaction, as suggested by Bevan and Murphy (2001). In the Nepalese context, both online retailers offer similar after-sales services, including product exchanges in the case of size, color, or design dissatisfaction, or if customers receive damaged products. This approach aligns with the concept of adding value to customers through after-sales services. However, the findings suggest that even though retailers aim to provide quality after-sales service, they sometimes encounter challenging situations where customers remain unsatisfied.

The quantitative research in context of Nepal for cement to building including laptop along with packaging found conforming the same in different ways(Mishra, A. K., & Chaudhary, U., 2018a&b:Mishra, A. K., 2019: Mishra, A. K., Rai, S., & Aithal, P. S., 2023:Mishra, A. K., & Aithal, P. S., 2021a&b: Sah, S., & Mishra., A. K., 2020: Mishra. A. K., 2019: Mishra, A. K., Sharestha, B., 2019). This research provides validity to several research in this context.

Conclusion

This study delved into the multifaceted landscape of online retailing in Nepal, shedding light on various practices, strategies, and challenges faced by online retailers in different dimensions of their operations. The findings provide valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of e-commerce in the Nepalese context.

Content Design Practices: The study underscores that practices of content design in offering products online are not customer-centric. Online retailers tend to manipulate information to serve their own interests rather than prioritizing consumers' needs. This highlights a lack of focus on consumer-centric design, as retailers appear less concerned about catering to consumer needs and more content with their existing offerings. This finding aligns with Siddiqui, O'malley, McColl, and Birtwistle's (2003) observations that retailers may not be fully attuned to consumer needs.

Generating Trust: One of the key challenges identified in the study is the struggle faced by online retailers in generating the expected level of trust among their customers. Building trust in the digital realm is a significant challenge, particularly due to the absence of physical presence. This challenge resonates with the importance of trust highlighted by Rahman, Khan, and Iqbal (2018), as it directly impacts the capacity of online retailers to create value for their customers.

Product Attributes Consideration: The study emphasizes the significance of tailoring

communication of product attributes to suit different product categories and market segments. Online retailers in Nepal appear to be cognizant of this aspect, as they apply diverse approaches based on the nature of their products. This aligns with Newholm et al.'s (2004) assertion that different product categories necessitate distinct levels of development and trust. It also aligns with Kim and Lennon's (2010) argument regarding the influence of product information and communication on customers' intention to revisit.

Customer Retention Strategies: Online retailers are seen to employ various strategies to retain customers, focusing on personalized care, product notifications, and special offers. They seek to provide a sense of customer delight, as suggested by Kim and Lennon (2010). The diverse approaches, such as technical strategies and personalized service, cater to different segments and market positions. Both strategies demonstrate a strong commitment to building lasting relationships with customers, fostering loyalty, and enhancing the overall customer experience.

After-Sales Service: Despite their best efforts to provide excellent after-sales service, online retailers encounter challenges when addressing customer concerns and complaints. This resonates with Bevan and Murphy's (2001) emphasis on creating value through post-purchase interactions. The study highlights the difficulties retailers face in ensuring customer satisfaction in every transaction, even though their intentions are focused on delivering a positive post-purchase experience.

In light of these findings, it is evident that the landscape of e-commerce in Nepal is a dynamic and complex one, shaped by the practices and strategies of online retailers. While these retailers strive to enhance the online shopping experience for their customers, challenges persist in terms of content design, trust generation, and customer satisfaction. Further research and collective efforts among stakeholders are needed to address these challenges and unlock the full potential of e-commerce in Nepal. As the digital marketplace continues to evolve, online retailers and consumers alike will need to adapt to these changing dynamics

and contribute to the growth and development of the e-commerce sector in Nepal.

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