



# An empirical analysis of factors that influence retail website visit types



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## ABSTRACT

Consumers may have a variety of reasons for using a retail brand's website, including browsing, purchasing, or browsing followed by purchasing. In this study we examine visits to three different retail websites to develop a typology of website visit behaviors and reveal factors that are associated with each visit type. We find four visit types that are consistent across all brands, which we label “touching base,” “search/deliberation,” “goal-directed,” and online shopping “cart-only” visits. One of the brands has an additional visit type we term “considered visits.” The type of visit a consumer makes is influenced by a combination of marketing channels, and their visit and purchase history with the brand. For example, shoppers that are directed to a retailer's website by clicking on a search engine link (paid or organic) are more likely to make visits that are associated with a purchase goal, while visits generated by an email are more likely to be just touching base. These findings provide marketers with a more refined understanding of the different ways consumers use their websites, and the factors associated with these visit behaviors.

## 1. Introduction

Increasingly consumers are engaging in online shopping, which now accounts for almost 9% of retail sales globally (Euroonitor, 2017b). Despite this, conversion rates at e-commerce sites remain low, with only 3% of visits to retail websites in 2016 resulting in a purchase (Monetate, 2017). Furthermore, about 80% of the time consumers “abandon” online shopping carts without completing a purchase (Kukar-Kinney and Close, 2010; Listrak, 2017). A major reason for these trends is that consumers use websites for multiple purposes, not just to purchase. For instance, it is common to research products online before making a purchase decision (Konus et al., 2008; Sands et al., 2016; Verhoef et al., 2007). Indeed, recent industry reports suggest that up to 70% of consumers search for information online through retail websites prior to purchase (PriceWaterhouse Coopers, 2015). While these information-search visits may not include a purchase, they still hold value for a firm. Introducing a non-transactional website (i.e., without the ability to purchase) increases firm revenue in some product categories (Pauwels et al., 2011), while consumers who browse online prior to purchasing in a physical store spend more than those who do not (Sands et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2007). Hence, focusing exclusively on purchasing ignores the broader value of retail website visits. Instead, marketers should understand the different reasons consumers visit their website, and tailor the experience accordingly.

Against this backdrop, we address two main research questions in

this study. First, we examine the types of visits consumers make to retail brand websites. We find there are four common types of visits across brands, ranging from touching base at a website, to visits based on a purchase goal. While our typology has some similarities to prior studies (e.g. Moe, 2003), we also find notable differences in the size of each visit type, as well as a new cart-only visit type. Second, we investigate the factors associated with the types of visits consumers make to a particular brand's website. We find that the probability of each visit type occurring is linked to a combination of marketing channels and the consumer's history with the brand. This has important implications for how marketers personalize their website for individual consumers. These findings contribute to existing knowledge by proposing a refined website visit typology, and providing an empirical analysis of the factors which are associated with these types of visits.

## 2. Literature review

One of the main advantages of the online channel compared with physical stores is that the shopping experience is easier to personalize. When the content of a brand's website is personalized to match a consumer's shopping goal (e.g., buying or browsing), visitors pay more attention, recall more information, and are quicker to make a purchase decision (Tam and Ho, 2006). Consumer motivations for using the online channel can also impact price consciousness (Scarpi et al., 2014), purchase intention for retailer social media sites (Anderson et al.,

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2014), and even compulsive buying behavior (Kukar-Kinney et al., 2016). Based on these effects, marketers may develop varied website experiences based on the motivations of different consumers. For example, consumers with a clear purpose may be fast-tracked to purchase, while those simply browsing may be offered more varied content (Scarpi, 2012). However, identifying the motivation of each visitor to a brand's website is challenging, and so researchers have focused on the way a consumer uses the website during each visit to infer consumer motivation (Barnes et al., 2007). For instance, the path that a consumer takes through a website can be used to predict whether they are likely to proceed to purchase completion (Montgomery et al., 2004). Similarly, navigating through a website can be seen as a series of tasks, and the completion of these tasks can indicate a consumer's purpose for visiting (Sismeiro and Bucklin, 2004). Alternatively, more specific details such as the number of pages and products that are viewed during a visit can help distinguish buyers from those just browsing (Moe, 2003; Van den Poel and Buckinx, 2005).

A convenient way to infer consumer motivations for using a retailer's website is a website visit typology. Underpinning a website visit typology is the notion that consumers visit a store (whether online or physical) for either goal-directed or exploratory purposes (Janiszewski, 1998). Goal-directed browsing occurs when a consumer has a particular purchase in mind, and seeks to gather information that is relevant to that purchase (Bloch et al., 1986). Alternatively, exploratory browsing occurs when consumers do not have a clear goal in mind, and visit a store to build information for future reference (Bloch et al., 1986) or simply for recreation (Punj and Staelin, 1983). These contrasting motivations affect the way that browsing occurs. Goal-directed browsing is focused on the purchase goal, while exploratory browsing is undirected and broader in scope (Bloch et al., 1986; Janiszewski, 1998).

Moe's (2003) seminal study was the first to apply this idea to develop a typology of website visits by cluster analyzing a retailer's clickstream database. Moe's (2003) analysis revealed five types of website visits; shallow, search/deliberation, knowledge building, hedonic browsing, and directed buying. Importantly, Moe (2003) suggests these distinct clusters are due to the different motivations consumers have for visiting a website, and therefore can be used to infer these motivations. Supporting this, Moe found that only 3.7% of visits are made with a clear purchase goal, which is in line with the low conversion rates observed at many websites (Monetate, 2017). Another of Moe's (2003) notable findings is that many visits include only two page views and no exposure to products, which were labelled "shallow visits," accounting for over three quarters of all visits to a brand's website. Moe (2003) attributes the preponderance of shallow visits to a general lack of consumer experience with the online channel, suggesting that many consumers conduct shallow visits to retail websites to briefly see what the retailer offers.

Moe's (2003) study provides a foundation for understanding the different motivations consumers have for using retail brand websites, and how these can be identified through the way consumers use a website. Furthermore, typologies such as Moe's can be used as a basis for optimizing website and promotional content for different consumer motivations (Kannan and Li, 2017; Schlosser et al., 2006; Tam and Ho, 2006). However, the way the Internet is used by consumers today has evolved considerably since the time of Moe's study. Online purchasing has become increasingly common over the past decade, while the prevalence of information search through the online channel has also increased. Furthermore, consumers are not only using an online shopping cart for purchases, but also as an organizational tool for future offline purchases (Close and Kukar-Kinney, 2010). Given these changes, it is likely that the types of visits consumers make to retail brand websites has also evolved. Indeed, Moe (2003) conjectured that the types of visits consumers make to websites would evolve over time, and specifically that the shallow visit type cluster would decrease in size, and even potentially cease to exist, as consumers become more experienced online shoppers. Hence, there is a need to re-examine the

types of visits that consumers make to retail brand websites, and investigate how these may have evolved over time.

In addition, there is a need to consider how the types of visits consumers make to a brand's website may be influenced by their history with the brand, as well as the brand's marketing efforts. Marketing efforts (Ansari et al., 2008; Danaher and Dagger, 2013) and a consumer's past behavior (Moe and Fader, 2004) each influence consumer behavior in a multi-channel environment. However, it is not clear how these factors relate to the specific types of visits that consumers make to a brand's website. This has potentially large implications for marketers, particularly related to website optimization and personalization. If certain elements of a consumer's past behavior influence the type of visits they make to a brand's website, then marketers may be able to personalize the website based on each consumer's most likely motivation for each visit to the site. As an example, consider the directed buying type of visit described by Moe (2003). This visit type is made by consumers with an immediate purchase goal in mind, and has the highest conversion rate. Hence, if marketers can identify the characteristics associated with this visit type, they may be able to identify visitors to their website with goal-directed intentions. This provides an opportunity to streamline the website experience to facilitate the purchase goal. Alternatively, if marketing efforts are related to different types of visits, then marketers may be able to encourage more valuable visit types (such as directed buying) over others (such as shallow visits).

### 3. Developing a website visit typology

To achieve our aim of developing an updated and more refined website visit typology, we must first identify variables that can be used to distinguish between different kinds of visits. Moe (2003) used a variety of variables in her study including the number of pages and products viewed (visit depth), time spent on site, the types of pages viewed, and the variety of product categories browsed (visit variety). We extend this list of variables to include additional measures of visit depth and visit variety, as well as measures of a consumer's use of an online shopping cart.

Visit depth is a measure of the amount of information that is accessed during a visit (Bucklin and Sismeiro, 2003; Danaher et al., 2006; Li and Chatterjee, 2005). The most basic measure of visit depth is visit duration, which is the amount of time a consumer spends on the website. Visit duration is a standard industry metric, as a longer time spent on a website implies greater interest and deeper consideration of the products listed on the site (Bucklin and Sismeiro, 2003; Danaher et al., 2006). However, a problem with visit duration is that consumers may have a website page open while not interacting with it. Hence, a potentially better measure of visit depth is the number of pages that are viewed during the visit. Page views have also been found to have a positive impact on completion of tasks early in the purchase process (e.g. product configuration) but increasingly negative impact as the consumer moves closer to the purchase stage (Sismeiro and Bucklin, 2004). Similarly, the number of pages that are viewed during a visit is negatively associated with use of the online shopping cart (and therefore the possibility of making a purchase) (Li and Chatterjee, 2005). Another measure of visit depth is the number of products that are viewed during a visit. Similar to page views, viewing only a small number of products indicates a specific shopping goal while viewing many products suggests a hedonic motivation is more likely (Moe, 2003). The total number of products viewed also helps predict if the customer will make a purchase during a visit (Van den Poel and Buckinx, 2005).

The second category of variables that differentiate types of visits is visit variety, being the range of information viewed during a visit. Variety seeking is a well-known benefit of online shopping (Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004), and variety in browsing behavior helps distinguish exploratory from goal-directed shopping behaviors (Bloch et al., 1986; Janiszewski, 1998). Visit variety can be measured through the

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