Understanding multichannel shopper journey configuration: An application of goal theory

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ABSTRACT

Shopping motivation is the dominant theoretical framework upon which shopping behaviour research is based. A shopper's motivation is assumed to be fixed and enduring, implying, in turn, homogeneity of shopper journeys. This paper reports on an exploratory, qualitative study of 76 multichannel shopper journeys. Heterogeneity of individual consumers' shopper journey configuration, in terms of numbers and types of phases and channels, was found both within and across product categories, which cannot be accounted for by motivation theory. For an individual shopper, multichannel shopper journey configuration appears to be driven by multiple goals operating at varying levels of abstraction. Higher level goals are relatively stable but lower level goals vary over time, place and context resulting in heterogeneity of journey configuration. Goal theory is proposed as a more suitable lens through which to examine multichannel shopping behaviour, overcoming the deficiencies inherent in shopping motivation theory.

1. Introduction

Researchers have long sought to understand the drivers of shopping behaviour (e.g. Stone, 1954; Tauber, 1972; Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980; Westbrook and Black, 1985; Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004; Ganesh et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2017). While Tauber (1972) asked why people shop, it is perhaps now more pertinent to ask why people shop *in the way they do*, as the proliferation of retail formats and channels has spurred growth in multichannel shopping.

Multichannel shopping is defined as purchase behaviour across multiple channels (Kumar and Venkatesan, 2005). The development of retailers' online stores and mobile applications alongside the established channels of physical stores, telephone and catalogues offers flexibility and choice to the shopper in where, how and when they carry out their shopping, and shopping behaviour has changed as a result (Verhoef et al., 2015). Multichannel retailing removes the spatio-temporal barriers to shopping which exist when shoppers only have a fixed store network to shop from. Channels have different characteristics and are not necessarily direct substitutes for one another and may be used by shoppers in different ways. New shopping activities such as showrooming where shoppers research in store and buy online (Rapp et al., 2015) and webrooming where shoppers research online and buy in store (Verhoef et al., 2015) have emerged as shoppers exploit channels' distinctive characteristics and take advantages of the opportunities

offered by a multichannel environment. In this context, the term multichannel shopper journey (Deloitte, 2014) has emerged to encompass the combination of shopping-related activities and channels used as the shopper moves from the initial stimulus to purchase through to post purchase activity such as exchange or return. A multichannel shopper journey differs from the purchase process or funnel in that it comprises search and evaluation activities in addition to the act of shopping, can be linear or iterative, usually involves more than one shopping channel, and takes place over elapsed time ranging from minutes to months. In a multichannel shopping environment, the ways in which a shopper journey can be configured are numerous. Shoppers search for ideas and information online, examine products in store, purchase via their mobile phone and return an unsuitable product at a drop-off point. The large number of shopping activity/channel permutations creates challenges for researchers in attempting to understand and predict patterns of shopping behaviour.

While this diversity in multichannel shopper journey configurations adds complexity for researchers and retailers, it provides flexibility to the shopper. As the traditional trip to a store or mall becomes the multichannel shopper journey, so the interaction grows between the activities which comprise the shopper journey, such as searching for products or compiling a shopping list, and other activities which the shopper engages in as part of their daily life.

Within the overall domain of shopping behaviour, multichannel

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shopper journey configuration is an under-researched subject and there is no specific guidance from the literature on the most appropriate conceptual basis to adopt in its research. Shopping motivation has been widely used as the conceptual basis for examining shopping behaviour in general, but such research tends to assume that a shopper's motivation is stable, fixed and enduring, and applies 'universally across contexts' (Bagozzi et al., 2003, p915). This would, in turn, imply fixed and stable shopper journeys. Shopper journeys may not always, however, be configured in the same way; even within a product category shoppers may exhibit heterogeneity as they use different channels to weave shopping activities into the fabric of their lives.

Goal theory (Pervin, 1983, 1989; Gollwitzer, 1993; Austin and Vancouver, 1996; Carver and Scheier, 1998) provides an alternative theoretical lens through which to examine shopper journey configuration. While motivation is the general energization of behaviour, goals determine the direction of behaviour and turn motivation into specific action (Elliot, 2006). A goal is an individual's 'internal representation of a desired state' (Austin and Vancouver, 1996, p338). Individuals pursue multiple goals simultaneously although at any time, one goal is likely to be dominant or *focal* in shaping behaviour, with others acting in a background capacity (Kopetz et al., 2012). Goals shape and guide actions (Pintrich, 2000), thus an individual's behaviour is dependent on the nature of their focal goal. Individuals may attain a given goal through multiple means, and specific behaviour may contribute to the attainment of more than one goal. A goal-theory perspective on the shopper journey, therefore, accommodates (a) heterogeneity in journey configuration, as the shopper's focal goal changes, and (b) shopper journeys where the focal goal is not shopping related.

This paper argues that while shopping motivation is the dominant theoretical framework upon which shopping behaviour research is based, it has deficiencies when applied to multichannel shopping behaviour, and is insufficiently nuanced to accommodate multichannel shopper journey configuration. Goal theory is proposed as a more suitable lens through which to examine shopping behaviour in a multichannel environment, overcoming the deficiencies inherent in the use of shopping motivation as the explanatory framework. In our application of goal theory to multichannel shopper journey configuration, we build on earlier research, such as that of Kopetz et al. (2012) and Puccinelli et al. (2009) who see goals as drivers and shapers of shopping behaviour, and extend this body of research into the multichannel shopping context.

Applying goal theory to multichannel shopper journey configuration will contribute to the understanding of shopping behaviour, and additionally will benefit retailers as they seek to optimise their investment in channel development and ongoing channel operations. This paper reports on an exploratory study of shopper journey configuration. The objective of the study is to apply goal theory to an examination of the ways in which individual consumers' shopper journeys are configured within and across product categories. A qualitative approach is adopted to explore multichannel shoppers' journey configurations alongside their focal and background goals.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. First research on shopping motivation and on the closely related concept of shopping orientation is discussed, and a review of literature on goal theory is presented. The research methodology is then set out, followed by presentation of the research findings, discussion, conclusions and recommendations.

2. Shopping motivation and shopping orientation

Examination of the extant research on shopping behaviour indicates the dominance of shopping motivation and shopping orientation as explanatory constructs. These two constructs seem to be closely entwined; although early studies (e.g. Westbrook and Black, 1985) have been based specifically on one or the other, subsequent researchers have conflated them. There is no consensus among researchers as to the precise definitions of shopping orientation and shopping motivation (Wagner and Rudolph, 2010) and they are often used interchangeably (Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980; Chetthamrongchai and Davies, 2000; Mehta et al., 2014). Reviews of shopper typologies (e.g. Ganesh et al., 2007) generally encompass typologies based on orientation and on motivation without differentiating between them.

Research on shopping orientation can be traced to Stone's (1954) sociological analysis of Chicago housewives. Stone identified four orientations to shopping – economic, personalising, ethical and apathetic – on the basis of attitudes to shopping and preferences for either local independent stores or large chain stores. Darden and Reynolds (1971) were able to replicate Stone's typology, also finding economic, personalising, ethical and apathetic orientations to shopping; the economic and apathetic orientations have been identified subsequently in a number of studies (e.g. Darden and Ashton, 1974; Reynolds et al., 2002; Brown et al., 2003). However, beyond these two orientations, there is considerable variety in the other shopping orientations which have been identified, for example: demanding shoppers, fastidious shoppers, quality seeking shoppers (Darden and Ashton, 1974); involved shoppers and community-oriented shoppers (Brown et al., 2003); special, brand-loyal, store-loyal, problem-solving, psycho-socializing and name-conscious shoppers (Moschis, 1976). There is, therefore, a lack of consistency in the shopping orientations identified and a resultant failure of research to coalesce around any consensus on what shopping orientation is and how it manifests itself.

Research on shopping motivation is generally considered to originate with Tauber (1972) who examined reasons for shopping beyond the purchase of a product. He identified 11 shopping motives, organised into personal and social. Westbrook and Black (1985) constructed a motivationally-oriented shopper typology to overcome the perceived limitations of typologies based on shopper orientations; lack of a unifying conceptual basis and differing research designs, creating the plethora of orientations noted above. Buttle and Coates (1984) and Westbrook and Black (1985) took Tauber's (1972) shopping motives as a starting point and attempted either to directly replicate these (Westbrook and Black) or to fit their own research findings into Tauber's framework (Buttle and Coates). Neither succeeded completely, and each study identified new motivations for shopping.

Despite the rich array of motivations generated in early research, the dominant shopping motivation typology has been more parsimonious, dividing shoppers into those motivated by convenience or utilitarian value, and those motivated by recreation or hedonic value (Bellenger et al., 1977; Babin et al., 1994). This recreational/hedonic versus convenience/utilitarian dichotomy has been widely employed in shopping behaviour research and the literature refers to utilitarian/hedonic shopping motivation and to utilitarian/hedonic shopping orientation interchangeably. Babin et al. (1994) posited that hedonic *and* utilitarian value could potentially be obtained from shopping, however researchers have tended to conceptualise these as mutually exclusive (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006; Yim et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2017), cementing the view that shoppers have one fixed and stable motivation/orientation, utilitarian or hedonic, which governs their entire shopping behaviour. Farquhar and Rowley's (2009, p427) observation that people are not 'convenience oriented per se' is an exception to this perspective, as is the view that motivation is dynamic (Megicks et al.'s, 2008) or contextualised (Buttle, 1992), but the prevailing view is that it is fixed for an individual and across consumer segments or shopper types.

Shopping motivation has more recently been examined in a multichannel context and is considered to influence shoppers' perceptions of channel attributes and their subsequent response to shopping channels. Shoppers' perceptions of channel attributes have been conceptualised as fixed due to their enduring shopping motivation; in turn, there has been a tendency to associate a utilitarian shopping motivation with the online channel (Mathwick et al., 2001; Overby and Lee, 2006) and a hedonic motivation with the store channel (Bäckström, 2006). By