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From Clicks to Bricks: A Study of Online and In-Store Shopping Choices Among Indian Youth

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Abstract

This empirical study investigates consumer behavior patterns in online and offline shopping channels among college students in India. Employing a descriptive research design, the study combines primary survey data from college students with comprehensive literature analysis to examine demographic, psychological, and technological determinants of channel preference. The research reveals significant shifts toward online shopping adoption, primarily attributed to convenience factors, cost-effectiveness, and temporal flexibility that enables 24/7 accessibility. Online platforms facilitate price comparisons, eliminate geographical constraints, and offer seamless digital payment integration with home delivery services. Despite e-commerce growth, offline shopping maintains substantial relevance, particularly for tactile product evaluation, immediate ownership satisfaction, and social shopping experiences. Traditional retail channels appeal to consumers who prioritize personal interaction, bargaining opportunities, and sensory product assessment before purchase decisions. Demographic analysis reveals that gender, educational attainment, and digital literacy significantly influence channel selection, with female consumers and higher-educated individuals demonstrating stronger online shopping propensity. Trust concerns, payment security apprehensions, and product quality uncertainties continue to moderate channel adoption patterns. The findings contribute theoretical insights into hybrid retail environments and provide practical implications for omnichannel strategy development. This research advances understanding of consumer behaviour evolution in emerging markets where traditional and digital commerce coexist.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, online shopping, offline shopping, college students, India

Introduction

Shopping is an essential activity intertwined with daily life that extends beyond the mere acquisition of goods and services. For many individuals, shopping provides more than just the fulfilment of needs; it represents a form of recreation, a means of stress relief, and an avenue for satisfying personal desires. This behavioural pattern infuses everyday life with moments of variety and excitement, breaking the monotony of routine existence (Kothari, 2005). Historically, shopping took place in physical marketplaces where consumers engaged directly

with sellers, enabling tactile experiences such as touching, feeling, and trying out the products prior to purchase. Such sensory involvement often influences consumer satisfaction and decision-making, making physical interaction a vital component of traditional retail (Forsythe & Liu, 2006).

The advent of the digital age has ushered in a major transformation within the retail sector through the emergence of online shopping. Enabled by advancements in internet connectivity and technology, online shopping allows consumers to browse, compare, and purchase products from remote locations at any hour of the day. This digital revolution has redefined the parameters of shopping convenience, providing myriad options, often at competitive prices and with the promise of doorstep delivery (Zhou, Dai & Zhang, 2007). Moreover, the increasing penetration of smartphones and mobile internet has accelerated the adoption of online retail channels, especially among younger demographics. This study focuses on the shifting patterns of consumer behaviour towards online and offline shopping among college students in India, an important cohort characterized by increased technological adaptability and evolving consumption habits (Hsiao, 2009). The Indian retail industry is at a critical juncture, witnessing rapid expansion of e-commerce platforms alongside sustained patronage of traditional brick-and-mortar stores. Understanding the nuanced preferences that guide college students—who represent future mainstream consumers—offers valuable insights for both retailers and policymakers endeavoring to optimize retail strategies and enhance customer experiences (Andrews & Currim, 2004).

The preference for online shopping among college students is driven primarily by perceived convenience, cost effectiveness, and the flexibility to shop anytime and anywhere without geographical or temporal constraints. Online platforms offer extensive product assortments, price comparisons, and secure digital payment methods that streamline the purchasing process (Forsythe & Liu, 2006). However, despite these advantages, offline shopping continues to hold substantial appeal, particularly for products where sensory evaluation is critical. Factors such as the ability to physically inspect merchandise, immediate ownership, social interaction, and the satisfaction derived from bargaining remain significant motivators within traditional retail (Xia & Monroe, 2009). Furthermore, demographic variables such as gender, educational background, and digital literacy influence shopping channel selection, with evidence indicating that female shoppers and those with higher educational attainment are more inclined towards online shopping (Hsiao, 2009). Trust concerns, including payment security and product authenticity, also play a pivotal role in shaping consumer behaviour across both modes. Given this complex interplay of factors, the study aims to delineate the differences and overlaps in consumer preferences for online and offline shopping among college students in India. It examines demographic, psychological, and technological determinants of shopping behaviour to generate actionable insights for enhancing retail engagement in a hybrid marketplace. The findings aim to contribute to academic discourse while providing practical guidance for retailers seeking to tailor their offerings in response to dynamic consumer expectations.

Literature Review

Models of Consumer Decision-Making

The theoretical foundation of consumer behavior research has been built upon several seminal models that attempt to explain how individuals navigate purchasing decisions. The most widely adopted framework is the five-step consumer decision-making model, which encompasses problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior (Schiffman et al., 2001). This linear progression, while foundational, has evolved significantly in the digital age, requiring adaptation to accommodate the complexities of online shopping environments. The Engel-Kollat-Blackwell Model provides a comprehensive framework that illustrates the intricate interplay between internal psychological processes and external environmental influences throughout the decision-making journey (International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications, 2025). This model emphasizes the dynamic nature of consumer behavior, recognizing that decisions are not made in isolation but are influenced by a complex web of factors including personal characteristics, social influences, and situational contexts.

Peterson, Balasubramanian, and Bronnenberg (1997) were among the first to recognize the need for specialized models addressing internet retail environments. Their pioneering work highlighted how factors such as product type, market structure, and consumer demographics fundamentally alter traditional decision sequences in digital contexts. This early recognition of the unique challenges posed by online shopping laid the groundwork for subsequent theoretical developments. Building upon these foundational insights, Zhou, Dai, and Zhang (2007) developed the Online Shopping Acceptance Model (OSAM), which specifically addresses the factors influencing consumer adoption of e-commerce platforms. OSAM integrates elements of technology acceptance theory with traditional consumer behavior models, emphasizing factors such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, trust, and security concerns that are particularly relevant in digital shopping contexts.

Recent research has further refined these models by incorporating the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) frameworks to better understand modern consumer decision-making processes (Rahman, 2025). The TPB model, which considers attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, has proven particularly effective in predicting online shopping intentions and behaviors across various product categories and demographic segments. Hsiao (2009) contributed significantly to understanding channel-specific preferences by demonstrating that web-based shopping fundamentally alters the traditional retail landscape. His research revealed that while online channels excel for certain product categories (music, software, books), offline channels maintain dominance for high-involvement purchases requiring sensory evaluation (automobiles, luxury goods, real estate). This category-specific channel preference has important implications for omnichannel retail strategies.

Andrews and Currim's (2004) empirical analysis of scanner data from both traditional and online supermarkets revealed fascinating behavioral distinctions between channel users. Their findings demonstrated that online consumers exhibit systematically different decision-making

patterns: lower price sensitivity, preference for larger package sizes, stronger brand loyalty, and more extensive brand-based screening behaviors compared to offline shoppers. These insights suggest that the cognitive processes involved in online versus offline shopping may be fundamentally different.

Theoretical Frameworks for Channel Choice

The evolution of consumer decision-making models has been accompanied by the development of sophisticated theoretical frameworks for understanding channel choice behaviour. Omnichannel customer behaviour research has identified numerous factors influencing channel selection, which can be broadly categorized into five domains: perceived channel characteristics, customer needs, situational factors, customer characteristics, and product/service characteristics (PMC, 2022). Perceived channel characteristics encompass factors such as convenience, accessibility, perceived risk, and channel-specific advantages. Research has consistently shown that convenience factors play a crucial role in channel selection, with online channels offering advantages in terms of search convenience and temporal flexibility, while offline channels provide benefits related to immediate product availability and sensory evaluation capabilities.

Customer characteristics including demographic variables (age, gender, income, education), psychographic factors (innovativeness, risk aversion, price consciousness), and technological proficiency significantly influence channel preferences. Hallikainen et al. (2019) identified distinct consumer segments such as "digital channel enthusiasts" who demonstrate high innovativeness and low technology-related anxiety, contrasting with more traditional consumers who prefer established offline channels.

Factors Influencing Shopping Channel Choice

The literature reveals a complex interplay of economic, psychological, and technological factors that drive consumer channel selection. Economic utility theory suggests that consumers make channel choices to maximize value while minimizing costs, including not only monetary expenses but also time, effort, and perceived risks (Forsythe & Liu, 2006).

Cost-benefit considerations extend beyond simple price comparisons to include transaction costs, search costs, and opportunity costs associated with different channels. Online shopping's cost advantages stem primarily from reduced overhead expenses for retailers, which can be passed on to consumers through lower prices. However, these savings must be weighed against additional costs such as shipping fees, potential return costs, and the time investment required for online search and evaluation processes. Convenience factors have emerged as perhaps the most significant drivers of online channel adoption. The ability to shop 24/7, avoid travel and parking hassles, easily compare products and prices, and have purchases delivered directly to one's location represents substantial convenience benefits for many consumers. Mobile commerce has further enhanced these convenience advantages by enabling shopping from virtually any location at any time.

Trust and security concerns remain significant barriers to online adoption, particularly for older consumers and those in emerging markets. Issues related to payment security, privacy

protection, product authenticity, and reliable delivery continue to influence channel choice decisions. Research has shown that trust acts as a mediating factor between perceived channel advantages and actual usage behaviour.

Product characteristics play a crucial role in channel selection, with consumers showing clear preferences for online channels for standardized, low-risk products and offline channels for high-involvement, experiential, or complex products requiring personal evaluation. The concept of "high-touch" versus "low-touch" products has become central to understanding channel preferences. Social and cultural influences also significantly impact channel choice behaviour. The innovation-diffusion hypothesis explains urban consumers' greater receptivity to online shopping through their higher openness to new technologies and ideas compared to rural counterparts. Additionally, cultural factors such as uncertainty avoidance and social influence from peer groups affect channel adoption patterns across different demographic segments.

Psychological factors including perceived risk, shopping enjoyment, need for human interaction, and desire for immediate gratification create complex preference patterns that vary significantly across individuals and situations. Research has identified distinct consumer psychographic segments with different channel preferences based on these psychological orientations. Recent studies have also emphasized the importance of situational factors in channel choice, recognizing that consumers may use different channels for different purchase occasions based on factors such as time pressure, purchase urgency, social context, and specific product needs. This has led to increased interest in omnichannel behaviour, where consumers seamlessly integrate multiple channels throughout their purchase journey.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate demographic and behavioural variations between online and offline consumer segments
2. To explore the motivational factors driving channel switching behaviour.
3. To determine the predictors of exclusive channel loyalty.
4. To assess the relationship between educational attainment and shopping channel preferences
5. To understand the interplay between consumer characteristics and shopping channel selection

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive research design, which is well-suited for systematically describing and analysing consumer behaviour patterns without manipulating variables (Scribbr, 2023). Descriptive research is particularly appropriate for investigating the "what," "when," "where," and "how" aspects of consumer shopping preferences, making it ideal for understanding existing phenomena in their natural settings (Dovetail, 2023). The descriptive approach enables the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a

comprehensive understanding of shopping behaviours among the target demographic. This design facilitates the identification of characteristics, frequencies, trends, and patterns in consumer behavior while maintaining objectivity and minimizing researcher bias (Entropik, 2025).

Population and Sampling

Target Population: The study focuses primarily on college students, representing a technologically adept demographic with evolving consumption patterns. The population also includes employed consumers and homemakers to provide broader contextual insights into shopping behaviours across different lifestyle segments.

Sampling Method: A convenience sampling approach was adopted due to accessibility constraints and resource limitations. While this method has inherent limitations regarding generalizability, it provides valuable preliminary insights into the shopping behaviours of the target demographic.

Data Collection Methods

Primary Data Collection

The primary data collection was conducted through structured questionnaires, designed as the principal research instrument. The questionnaire development process followed established guidelines for consumer behavior research (Kantar, 2025):

- **Questionnaire Design:** Questions were formulated to be clear, concise, and neutral to minimize response bias and confusion
- **Content Validity:** Items were designed to elicit insights into consumer attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and intentions regarding online and offline shopping modes
- **Length and Structure:** The questionnaire was kept concise to reduce respondent fatigue while ensuring comprehensive coverage of research objectives
- **Pre-testing:** The instrument underwent preliminary testing to identify and address potential issues in question clarity and response options
- **Data Collection Process:** Questionnaires were administered through multiple channels to maximize response rates and ensure diverse representation within the target population.

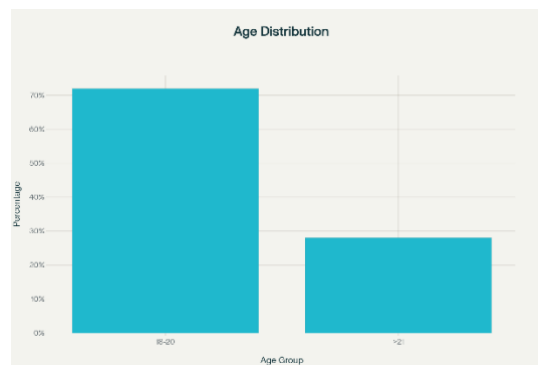
Secondary Data Collection

Secondary data were systematically gathered from multiple sources to supplement primary findings and provide contextual background. Academic journals and research publications, Industry reports and statistical databases, Government publications and official statistics, Reputable online platforms and digital resources, Previous studies on consumer behavior and e-commerce trends

Data Analysis and Graphical Interpretation

1. Age Distribution

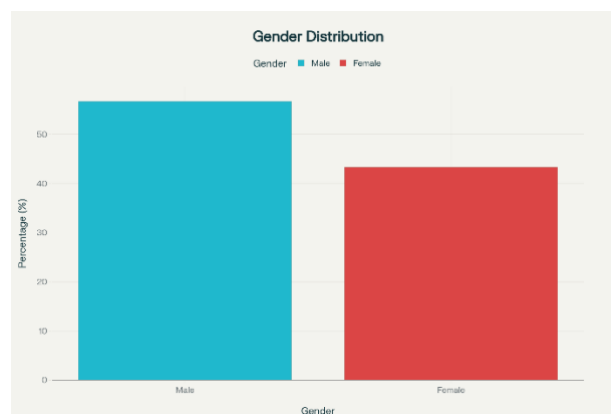
A majority (72%) of respondents were aged 18–20, with the remaining 28% over 21 years



[Chart 1: Age distribution of college student respondents]

2. Gender Distribution

Male respondents comprised 56.7% of the sample, while females made up 43.3%



[Chart-2: Gender distribution of survey respondents]

3. Primary Shopping Mode Preference

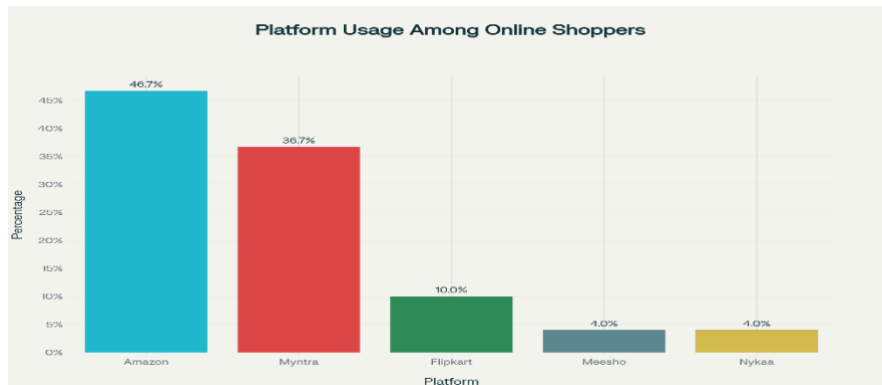
Online shopping was preferred by 63.3% of respondents, whereas 36.7% favoured offline shopping.



[Chart-3: Primary shopping mode preference]

4. Platform Usage for Online Shopping

Among online shoppers, 46.7% used Amazon, 36.7% used Myntra, 10% used Flipkart, and 4% each used Meesho and Nykaa.



[Chart-4: Platform usage among online shoppers]

5. Importance Criteria in Shopping Channels

- *Offline:* Quality (56.7%), Salesperson advice (20%), Price (16.7%), Payment facility (6.7%).



[Chart -5: Importance criteria for offline shopping]

- *Online:* Quality (46.7%), Delivery convenience (23.3%), Payment security (23.3%), Price (6.7%).



[Chart -6: Importance criteria for online shopping]

70% of respondents valued bargaining in offline shopping, Key offline benefits: product inspection, immediate ownership, social experience, Key online benefits: time savings (66.7%), wider product access (23.3%), gift shipping (6.7%), 86.7% had over one year of internet usage experience, 66.7% were willing to travel more than 10 miles for offline shopping.

These findings underscore the predominant shift towards online shopping among college students—driven by convenience, product accessibility, and time efficiency—while highlighting persistent motivators for offline shopping, such as sensory evaluation and social interaction. Demographic factors, trust, and channel-specific advantages continue to shape consumer preferences in a hybrid retail environment.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the evolving dynamics of consumer behaviour across online and offline shopping channels among college students in India. Employing a descriptive design and combining survey data with a rigorous review of existing literature, the research has illuminated several critical insights that both advance academic understanding and offer practical guidance for retailers and policymakers.

First, the demographic profile of respondents—predominantly aged 18–20 and representing both genders—underscores the importance of targeting emerging adult consumers whose preferences signal broader market trajectories. Female students and those with higher levels of education demonstrated a notably stronger propensity for online shopping, reflecting the confluence of digital literacy and value perceptions that favour e-commerce. Nevertheless, a significant portion of students continues to trust and patronize offline channels, driven by the sensory richness of in-person experiences and the social gratification of shared shopping trips.

Second, the shift toward online platforms is fueled by three interrelated factors: convenience, cost efficiency, and temporal flexibility. Students appreciate the ability to compare extensive product assortments, avoid travel time, and complete transactions around the clock. The integration of secure digital payment options and reliable home-delivery services further cements online shopping's appeal. At the same time, offline channels retain their relevance for products requiring tangible inspection—such as apparel, electronics, and luxury items—where the immediacy of ownership and the ability to negotiate in person remain decisive purchase drivers. Third, the analysis of platform usage revealed that Amazon and Myntra dominate the online shopping landscape for this cohort, followed by Flipkart, Meesho, and Nykaa. This concentration highlights the need for omnichannel retailers to develop differentiated value propositions, whether through superior logistics, curated assortments, or immersive digital experiences that replicate in-store touchpoints. The importance criteria for each channel—quality, delivery convenience, payment security, and price for online; quality, salesperson advice, price, and payment facilities for offline—underscore the multifaceted trade-offs consumers navigate when selecting a mode for each purchase occasion.

Fourth, the study identified key behavioural patterns such as high bargaining activity in offline shopping and pronounced time-saving motivations online. These patterns reflect the underlying psychological drivers: the desire for control and engagement in offline settings, and the

premium placed on efficiency and autonomy in digital environments. Additionally, students' extensive internet experience and willingness to travel for offline shopping illuminate the interplay of familiarity, trust, and channel accessibility in shaping overall shopping behaviour.

From a managerial perspective, these findings suggest several strategic imperatives. Online retailers should continue enhancing trust signals—such as transparent return policies, real-time order tracking, and secure payment gateways—to address lingering concerns around security and product authenticity. They should also invest in mobile-first interfaces and personalized recommendation engines that cater to the tech-savvy student demographic. Conversely, brick-and-mortar stores can differentiate themselves by creating experiential retail environments, leveraging trained staff to offer expert advice, and integrating digital tools—such as in-store kiosks and augmented reality—to bridge the gap between physical and digital experiences.

At the policy level, facilitating digital infrastructure development, promoting consumer education on online payment security, and encouraging fair practices across both channels will ensure that the benefits of digital commerce are equitably distributed. Further research could explore longitudinal shifts in shopping behaviour as students transition into different life stages, or comparative analyses across urban and rural cohorts to unpack geographic variations in channel adoption. In sum, the coexistence of online and offline shopping channels forms a hybrid retail ecosystem shaped by demographic realities, technological advances, and evolving consumer expectations. College students, as digital natives and future mainstream consumers, embody this hybrid dynamic. Understanding their nuanced preferences and decision pathways equips retailers and policymakers with the knowledge required to innovate, integrate, and sustainably serve a generation that seamlessly oscillates between clicks and bricks.

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