SOCIAL IMAGE OF STUDENTS WHO SHOP AND DON'T SHOP ONLINE[1]

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Summary.—A descriptive survey of a stratified random sample of 326 undergraduates from a large, diverse university in Los Angeles was conducted to assess whether resistance to online shopping might be, in part, related to negative social perceptions of those who shop online. Indirect questioning showed that students perceived online student shoppers as more lazy and less likely to fear for the safety and security of others but also as more trustworthy, attractive, successful, and smart. Differences in social perceptions were not related to these students' own online spending.

Online consumer sales represented only about 1.5% of total U.S. retail sales in 2001, but online sales have continued to grow at the rate of about 15 to 20% per year.[2] The advantages of online shopping, relative to more traditional forms of shopping, are well-known and include such factors as convenience, economy of consumption, and diversity of searchable products (Yoon, 2002). On the other hand, consumers' resistance to shopping online has been attributed to a variety of factors, which generally focus on issues involving consumers' trust, namely, concerns about privacy and security, concerns about product quality, and concerns about the trustworthiness of the manufacturer or distributor (Yoon, 2002).

However, one factor seldom discussed in studies of consumers' resistance to online shopping is the social image of online shopping. It is not unusual for consumers to avoid trying new products or services if they perceive negative social stigma attached to those who buy the product or use the service (Anderson, 1978). For example, in a classic experiment on consumers' behavior, Haire (1950) found through projective questioning that women were rejecting instant coffee in favor of the traditional regular ground coffee primarily because they did not want to be perceived as lazy, spendthrift, and uncaring. Direct questioning had shown that instant coffee was rejected for its taste, i.e., the consumers' rejection was symptomatic of a problem with the product. Indirect, projective questioning, however, show-

ed that instant coffee users were perceived to have undesirable character traits, i.e., consumers' rejection was symptomatic of a problem with the social image of the product, also known as a problem of perceived social acceptability (Titchener & Sapp, 2002).

Since most, if not all, online shopping research has used direct questioning rather than indirect questioning techniques, the influence of social image in online shopping has been somewhat obscured. The present purpose was to use indirect questioning in assessing whether the perceived social image of online undergraduate shoppers is significantly different from that of those who seldom or never shop online.

METHOD

Participants and Probability Sampling Method

A stratified random sample of 326 undergraduates (153 men and 173 women) was obtained from California State University, Northridge of over 32,000 students. To obtain this probability sample, students in marketing research and consumer behavior classes acted as survey teams of two or three for partial fulfillment of course requirements. Each survey team was given a map of the campus marked off into nine areas or "strata." Each survey team's map showed the route the team was to take, the strata in which the team was to approach prospective respondents, and the number of interviews to acquire from each stratum. To reduce potential interviewer bias effects, each survey team was required to complete interviews from each of the nine strata by approaching every third student in a stratum until the quota of interviews for that stratum was met. No two survey teams had the same starting point and routes to follow.

Overall, the purpose of this stratified random sampling was to ensure that the student respondents came from the major diverse sections of campus. The plan appeared to produce a representative sample of the students who were on campus during the time of the interviews, as supported by the low sampling errors observed on the 6-point scales used in the survey (standard error of the means ranged from .10 to .18). Regarding majors, 24.6% of the students were majors in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and related areas; 23.7% were business majors; 11.6% were engineering and computer science majors; 9.8% were art, theatre, and film majors; 8.9% were health science majors; 8.9% were biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics majors; 2.1% were geography, history, and political science majors; 2.1% were English and foreign languages majors; and 7.4% were undecided. Regarding class level, 19.5% of the students were freshmen, 15.5% were sophomores, 28% were juniors, 32.9% were seniors, and 4% were graduate students. The mean number of hours per week the participants spent on outside jobs or internships was 17.79 ($SD = 12.63$).

Survey

Manipulation of buyer vs nonbuyer cognitive set.—Each survey team randomly administered two different versions of the survey identical to one another except that on the instruction page respondents were asked to either "picture in your mind a CSUN student who has not purchased something over the Internet within the last couple of months" (Nonbuyer Cognitive Set) or to "picture in your mind a CSUN student who has purchased something over the Internet within the last couple of months" (Buyer Cognitive Set).

Trait descriptors of the target.—The participants then rated this imaginary target student on a set of 24 6-point trait descriptors with anchors of 1: Strongly Disagree and 6: Strongly Agree. The 24 trait-descriptor items were "is shy and reserved," "is physically attractive," "does not have Internet access at home," "feels that computers and the Internet are overhyped," "belongs to a sorority or fraternity," "is an honor roll student," "is male," "is concerned about his/her physical appearance," "will be successful in his/her career," "fears for the safety and security of others," "likes the I-Mac (Apple) computer," "is socially active," "would enjoy shopping at Wal-Mart," "has an internship or part-time job related to major," "cheats on exams," "loves children," "is an engineering major," "enjoys surfing the Internet," "is nerdy," "has trouble figuring out why the car won't start," "is physically attractive," "loves CSUN," "is a trusted friend," and "is lazy."

Own spending behavior.—The participants also indicated about how much, if anything, they themselves had spent on Internet purchases in the last couple of months by checking one of the following eight categories: "None," "$1 to $50," "$51 to $100," "$101 to $150," "$151 to $200," "$201 to $250," "$251 to $300," or "more than $300." For subsequent analyses, participants were divided into three categories based upon how they responded to this spending item: None ($n = 153$) vs Moderate ($1 to $150, $n = 106$) vs Heavy (more than $150, $n = 67$).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trait-descriptor Ratings of Buyer and Nonbuyer Target

A 2 × 3 multivariate analysis of variance was run on the set of 24 trait-descriptor ratings with cognitive set (Buyer vs Nonbuyer) and participants' own online spending behavior (None vs Moderate vs Heavy) as the between-subjects factors. Only the cognitive set multivariate main effect was statistically significant (Wilks $\lambda = .646$; $F_{24,262} = 5.98$, $p = .001$). Perceptions of the online buyers and nonbuyers were not affected by the participants' own amount of online spending (Wilks $\lambda = .808$; $F_{24,262} = 1.23$, $p =$ ns) or by the interaction of such spending with cognitive set (Wilks $\lambda = .828$; $F_{24,262} = 1.08$, $p =$ ns). In

short, the online buyers and the nonbuyers rated the imaginary target student similarly.

The significant cognitive set multivariate analysis of variance main effect allowed the computation (with reduced danger of ballooning alpha error) of a series of 2 ×3 univariate analyses of variance on the descriptor ratings to identify which specific trait ratings were directly related to the cognitive set main effect. The analysis showed that the online buyer, relative to the nonbuyer, was perceived more likely to enjoy surfing the Internet, more likely to be successful in a future career, more likely to be a trusted friend, more likely to be an honor roll student, more likely to be physically attractive, more likely to be lazy, and more likely to be male, but less likely to fear for the safety and security of others, less likely to think the Internet is overhyped, and less likely to have no Internet access at home. The means and standard deviations for these 10 significant effects are shown in Table 1. The cognitive set main effect tests on the remaining 14 descriptor traits were not statistically significant (all $ps > .05$).

TABLE 1
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF STUDENTS WHO ARE
ONLINE BUYERS ($n = 155$) AND NONBUYERS ($n = 149$)

Item	Buyers		Nonbuyers		df	F
	M	SD	M	SD		
Enjoys surfing the Internet	5.0	1.3	3.4	1.8	1,298	65.72
Will be successful in future career	4.1	1.3	3.7	1.5	1,298	4.76
A trusted friend	3.8	1.3	3.4	1.4	1,298	4.90
An honor roll student	3.5	1.4	3.0	1.4	1,296	10.41
Is physically attractive	3.5	1.2	3.1	1.4	1,298	4.65
Is lazy	3.4	1.5	2.9	1.6	1,298	6.47
Is male	3.2	1.6	2.6	1.6	1,296	9.81
Fears for the safety of others	3.1	1.3	3.6	1.4	1,298	8.16
Thinks Internet is overhyped	2.3	1.5	3.5	1.6	1,296	38.16
Has no Internet access at home	2.2	1.7	3.8	1.9	1,297	51.55

Note.—All buyer vs nonbuyer comparisons are statistically significant ($p < .05$). Ratings are based on a 6-point scale using anchors of 1: strongly disagree and 6: strongly agree.

The analyses showed significant differences in perceptions of online versus nononline shoppers but the magnitudes of all these were less than one point, and the evaluative directions of these differences were mixed. Although students perceived their online shopping peers to be lazy and less likely to fear for the safety and security of others, they also perceived them to be trustworthy, attractive, successful, and smart. Thus, the negative social stimuli attached to online shopping seemed to be counterbalanced by some positive social perceptions. As online shopping inevitably becomes more commonplace, the social image of the online shopper should become more

positive than observed here. However, social image advertising directed at enhancing the image of online shoppers may speed up the whole process, much as social image advertising enhanced consumers' acceptance of instant coffee and cake mixes in the 1950s (Haire, 1950).

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