

Examining Factors Driving University Students' Transition to Online Purchasing During the Post-Pandemic Era: A Case Study on Double-Double Sales

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic had a tremendous impact on customer behavior, specifically among university students, initiating a move towards online purchases. This change has affected traditional retail sectors and resulted in new e-commerce trends. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, people were accustomed to purchasing goods physically. Consequently, many organisations have adopted various marketing strategies to entice customers. One such tactic frequently employed by e-commerce organizations is the “Double-Double” sale. The objective was to identify key factors prompting students to engage in online shopping. To comprehend the factors motivating Malaysians, particularly university students, to participate in online shopping during Double-Double sales, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 Malaysian university students. The findings revealed that convenience, pricing, and social media advertisements are key drivers of Malaysian university students' shift from traditional to online shopping.

Keywords: Online shopping, COVID-19, University students, Double-Double sales

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, trade and commerce have increasingly diversified, leading to multichannel retailing and a significant increase in online shopping worldwide. Online shopping refers to the process of purchasing goods or services directly from a retailer through the Internet (Ahmed et al., 2018).

With the assistance of the Internet, individuals can utilise the quick search function on a search engine to locate them to search items. It also allows for the ease of purchasing goods from the comfort of one's home and has been proven to save time for individuals. Despite these benefits, customers have yet to fully embrace online shopping. Scholars have identified various factors that contribute to the persistent preference for traditional shopping methods over online alternatives. These factors are collectively responsible for the reluctance of many customers to embrace online shopping platforms.

A significant contributing factor to this phenomenon was customers' in-person shopping experiences. In the past, customers would physically visit stores, peruse product offerings, interact with sales staff for information and recommendations, and even touch and feel items to assess their quality, value, and functionality (Millar et al., 2023). This hands-on approach played a crucial role in the decision-making process, enabling consumers to evaluate products thoroughly and make informed choices.

Another contributing factor to the appeal of traditional shopping was the social element. Many customers viewed visiting malls or shopping districts as an opportunity to spend quality time with loved ones, creating a pleasurable and bonding experience. Engaging in social interactions with store employees, such as face-to-face conversations, further enhanced their overall happiness and contentment with the shopping process.

The third contributing factor to the popularity of traditional retail locations was that consumers had a higher level of trust in them. Customers were more assured and confident in their purchasing decisions, given that they could physically inspect and assess the products. Furthermore, the convenience of being able to take the items home immediately after purchase further enhanced the appeal of traditional shopping.

Traditional shopping used to rely heavily on marketing and promotional methods in physical

store locations. These methods included visible displays, store layouts, in-store promotions, and personalized customer interactions. The sensory experience of seeing, touching, and interacting with products in a physical location played a significant role in generating customer curiosity and impulse purchases.

In 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 brought about significant changes in the purchasing behavior of customers. To control the spread of the virus, the Malaysian government implemented Movement Control Orders (MCOs). Consequently, individuals turned to online platforms for their purchasing needs, which proved to be a crucial solution during these challenging times. This shift towards online platforms demonstrated the adaptability and resilience of businesses and customers, leading to a new era where digital transactions become increasingly popular.

In the competitive e-marketplace, differentiation is imperative to attract and retain customers. E-commerce platforms like Shopee and Lazada have implemented a “Double-Double” sales strategy to attract customers. Double-double sales are promotions on specific dates that correspond with the number of months (Alibudbud, 2022), such as February 2nd, July 7th, and November 11th. These sales offer the best deals and are expected to be even more successful than regular discounts or payday sales.

Diverse sales promotions have introduced in e-marketplace platforms with the aim of boosting customers’ purchase intention. Yet, the effectiveness of these sales strategies remains uncertain. While numerous studies have examined consumer buying behavior towards online shopping in developed countries (Ali, Goh & Kamalul, 2019), research in developing countries like Malaysia, where online shopping is gaining popularity among university students (Ahmad et al., 2018), is limited. Therefore, this study aims to investigate factors driving Malaysian university students' online shopping, especially during "Double-Double" sales; thus, it is able to provide a comprehensive understanding of their post-pandemic purchasing behaviour.

This research study mainly focuses on university students aged between 18 and 30. This demographic has grown up in the digital age and is known for being tech-savvy. As such, they are more likely to participate in online shopping and special sales events like “Double-Double” sales. Despite not always being financially independent, university students still hold significant purchasing power as a customer group. By analyzing their online purchasing behavior during sales events, valuable insights can be gained into customer patterns and preferences. Furthermore, university students often act as trendsetters and influencers among their peers, making it crucial to understand their buying behavior and its potential impact on the wider customer population during online sales events.

METHODS

A qualitative interview-based research approach has been employed to gain a thorough understanding of the online shopping behaviors of Malaysian university students during “Double-Double” sales. This study aims to gather in-depth insights into the factors that motivate university students to purchase online. The qualitative research method comprehensively explores individuals’ experiences, motivations, and perceptions, providing rich and contextualised data. Interviews offer the opportunity to delve into participants’ experiences, thoughts, and decision-making processes related to customer online purchasing behavior. Semi-structured interviews are carried out to gather data from the participants, and this interview method allowed us to explore the perspectives and experiences of participants while providing some flexibility for further probing on interesting points.

Research Participants

To examine Malaysian university students' online buying behavior, researchers carefully screened participants based on specific inclusion criteria. Firstly, participants needed to be currently enrolled as university students in Malaysia. Secondly, they must have experience with online shopping, particularly "Double-Double" sales. These criteria were designed to ensure that the selected participants were not only university students but also active online shoppers during special sales events, such as "Double-Double" sales. This criterion was vital to align the research with our objectives and the focus on Malaysian university students' online buying behavior during these sales events. A total of 13 Malaysian university were participated in this interview.

Data Analysis Method

The interviews were analysed using the deductive thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke. The researchers carefully transcribed the recorded interview audio to become acquainted with the data. They read and re-read the transcripts, noting key points and generating initial ideas. The codes were then reviewed against each transcript to search for themes. Each theme was carefully scrutinised to ensure coherence. The researchers identified each theme and determined the aspects of the data it captured. Finally, all themes were defined, named, and presented with participant quotes. Before the interviewees agreed to participate in this interview, necessary information was provided, and they were aware that participation was voluntary. They were also informed that their names and details would remain anonymous.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, online shopping has gained significant popularity among consumers. With more individuals turning to e-commerce platforms for their shopping needs, it's essential for online stores to retain customers. To enhance customer loyalty, e-commerce giants like Shopee and Lazada have implemented various sales strategies, including "Double-Double" sales. However, it remains unclear whether such tactics are effective in driving university students towards online purchases. To address this question, this study aims to identify the factors motivating students to engage in online shopping.

The study's results reveal that three primary factors influence university students' transition towards online purchasing behavior, which are convenience factors, pricing factors, and social media advertisements factors.

Convenience Factors

In this study, "convenience of online shopping" pertains to the ease and simplicity of shopping from any location and at any time. This not only saves time but also enables customers to compare prices across various online platforms. The user-friendly features of online shopping have made it effortless for customers to make purchases, resulting in a surge of people turning to e-commerce for their shopping needs. This is evidenced by Participant S6's statement, "The online shopping platform is easy to use and user-friendly."

According to Raman (2019), convenience enters the picture because online shopping can be done from the comfort of one's home. The advent of online platforms has significantly facilitated the process of product search and purchase for consumers. With the convenience of making purchases from anywhere in the world without being physically present, customers can now access a wide array of products with ease and flexibility. This has ushered in a new era of online commerce, enabling consumers to take advantage of an ever-increasing range of products and services available at their

fingertips. As one of the participants in the study, S10, emphasized, she can shop without any restrictions on time and place, making online shopping her preferred choice. Per her statement, “I can shop from my phone or laptop, anytime, anywhere, making online shopping my preferred choice.”

Furthermore, online retailers typically provide delivery services for their products. Once a customer has placed an order online, they can opt to have their purchases delivered directly to their home. This allows them to receive their items without needing to be present in person, saving them valuable time that would otherwise be spent waiting in queues (Anesbury et al., 2016). Participant S7 noted, “Online shopping platform save my time because with a few clicks I can make my purchases and wait for the parcel to reach my doorstep.” Participant S15 also shared this sentiment, stating, “I value the convenience of home delivery, and it often influenced my decision to shop online.”

Upon careful analysis of the data, it has been determined that convenience features play a crucial role in shaping university students’ purchase behavior. The convenience of online shopping allows people to shop from anywhere, anytime, and without the need to transport their physical purchases. This leads them to opt for online shopping. The convenience features offered by e-commerce platforms have emerged as a pivotal factor in the shift of students from physical stores to online marketplaces.

Pricing Factors

According to Falahat and Liew (2019), customers are price-sensitive audiences; they tend to compare prices with other vendors to secure lower prices before purchasing (Falahat & Liew, 2019). Prices have become an important factor influencing customers' purchase decisions (Prasetyo et al., 2019). To attract and retain customers to make online purchases, e-commerce organizations are implementing various pricing strategies. Communication of the potential savings through promotions such as “double-double” sales or flash sale programs is critical to achieving this.

“Double-double” sales are an excellent pricing strategy to attract customers, especially student customers. These promotions generally offer attractive discounts, exclusive deals, and time-limited promotions, and they significantly influence Malaysian university students’ purchase decisions. Participant S2 indicated, “What influences my purchase intention the most during double-double sales is that promotional offers, discounts, and coupons are attractive.” Another participant, S3, noted that prices during these sales are often lower than expected, encouraging them to purchase. Besides, students are generally budget-conscious groups of customers seeking value for their money and actively looking for opportunities to save. As participant S5 said, “The discounts offered during Double-Double sales are often deeper than regular sales. It’s the best time to grab items I’ve been eyeing.” These incentives are potent motivators for online purchases, especially during these events, as students perceive them as opportunities to save money. A participant in the study, S1, expressed, “Double-double sales help me to save money and get more value for my purchases.”

Furthermore, incorporating pricing strategies such as “double-double” sales would significantly boost customers’ desire and likelihood to purchase. This is mainly because of the fear of missing out on the discounted offer. As noted by Participant S2, “A limited-time sale, in particular, can create a sense of urgency and drive purchase intent.” Ahmadinejad et al. (2017) also found that when customers encounter a discount, it will trigger their minds and create a sense of anxiety when deciding whether to purchase the item. Participant S9 shared that she doesn’t mind waiting for a special promotion period to make her purchase. She mentioned, “Some stores offer exclusive discounts or deals only during Double-Double sales, making it worth waiting for these events.”

Overall, e-commerce platforms employ various promotional tactics, such as Double-Double sales, to stimulate customers’ engagement and participation in online shopping. University students

who exhibit cost-conscious behavior are demonstrating a growing preference for online shopping platforms. The competitive pricing offered by e-commerce platforms has proven to be a significant factor in this shift, as traditional shopping options are unable to match these prices. As a result, price is one of the factors that drive university students to shift from traditional shopping to online shopping.

Social Media Advertisements Factors

In contemporary society, social media has become a vital component. It has significantly influenced social engagement and information dissemination for individuals and organizations (Kauffman et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2021; Mohammed & Qhal, 2020). Social media platforms offer people a means of staying up-to-date and interacting with organizations that interest them. At the same time, organizations utilize social media to share details about their operations and connect with their audience.

Social media has become an indispensable part of university students' lives. They depend on social media platforms to explore, interact with, and take part in sales events. Consequently, e-commerce enterprises employ social media advertising as a means to effectively connect with their intended audience. Participant S7 mentioned, "I first heard about Double-Double sales through social media announcements. It's where I get the dates and details." Participant S13 also has a similar experience; he noted, "Social media ads and sponsored posts about Double-Double sales can catch my attention." University students are active social media users. Thus, it comes as no surprise that social media advertisements prove to be an effective means of capturing their attention in regard to double-double sales.

Social media advertisement is not only a highly effective medium for businesses to reach their intended audience, but it also can ultimately affect their purchase decision. Consequently, e-commerce organizations use engaging and visually appealing content and strategic timing of announcements to maximize benefits during "Double-Double" sales. As one of the participants, S14, mentioned, "Social media ads showcasing products with big discounts during Double-Double sales can prompt me to explore more and possibly make a purchase." Additionally, social media advertising has the power to intensify customers' desire to purchase. Participant S15 shared, "When I see an advertisement for a product, I was already considering buying, it often accelerates my decision to make the purchase."

Overall, social media advertising has been found to be an effective tool in increasing the awareness of upcoming sales among Malaysian university students. It has been observed that such advertising plays a significant role in shaping their purchasing decisions. Social media ads effectively increase customer awareness, generate interest, and ultimately drive sales. Therefore, it can be concluded that social media advertising is also a crucial factor that impacts university students' online purchase behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, customer purchasing behaviour was heavily influenced by the traditional buying experience, which included physical presence, social connection, tactile engagement, and a sense of trust and immediacy. However, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted established patterns, resulting in a rapid transition to internet buying and the adoption of new consumer behaviors motivated by safety concerns, convenience, and shifting market dynamics.

According to Calvin Wong, Head of Digital Business in Group Community Banking at RHB

Banking Group, there has been a remarkable 49% rise in online expenditure since the pandemic, with a recent 9% quarterly expansion (“Online shopping still good post-pandemic”, 2022). As noted by Mohamed et al. (2022), consumers are turning to digital channels for their shopping needs. This highlights the importance of understanding the factors driving this shift towards online purchasing and exploring the motivations of university students in particular.

The findings of the study indicated that online shopping’s convenience, competitive pricing, and appealing social media advertisement have significantly influenced customers' transition from physical stores to online shopping. With online shopping, customers can make purchases anytime and anywhere without any restrictions stemming from time or location. Additionally, the cost-effectiveness of products on e-commerce platforms and persuasive social media advertisements have played a crucial role in prompting customers to prefer online shopping to traditional retail stores.

According to the study’s findings, pricing strategies adopted by e-commerce organizations have the most significant influence on the purchasing behavior of Malaysian university students, compared to the other two factors discussed. Therefore, it is able to understand the reasons e-commerce organizations often conduct "Double-Double sales" to create the perception of a big sale or the highest discount in the customers' minds, with the aim of attracting them to make purchases.

Convenience plays another significant role in transforming Malaysian university students' purchase behaviour from traditional to online shopping. With the convenience features of online shopping, customers can save their shopping time by simply placing orders using their mobile devices with a few clicks and then awaiting delivery at their doorstep. Online shopping has become a convenient way for university students to purchase the necessary products, especially considering their busy schedules. It eliminates the need for physical travel and searching for products, saving valuable time and effort; this particular feature is absent in traditional shopping. Due to the unparalleled convenience that online shopping offers, university students have been increasingly opting for this mode of purchase over traditional shopping.

Social media advertising is another factor that significantly influences university students’ purchasing behavior. By utilizing social media platforms, organizations can easily reach a wide audience and promote sales and discounts with visually appealing content, capturing the attention and purchase intention of potential customers. While traditional media advertising may have had a similar effect in the past, the number of traditional media audiences has decreased dramatically. Furthermore, university students are tech-savvy and heavy social media users, social media has become their primary source of information and daily use. As a result, social media advertising has an impact on university students, transforming their purchasing behavior.

In conclusion, the arrival of COVID-19 has significantly transformed consumer behavior, leading to more frequent online shopping. In the post-COVID-19 era, online shoppers have increased as people have become accustomed to this shopping method over the past two years since the outbreak. The three factors influencing Malaysian university students to shop online, especially during Double-Double sales, are convenience, pricing, and social media advertisements.

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