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A closer look at lock-in effect and channel preference

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Keywords: multi-channel, spillover effect, lock-in effect, channel integration, fashion, consumer behavior.

1 Introduction

Companies aim to achieve maximum efficiency in their increasing offer of channels and services to deliver the best possible customer experience at the right time, which requires understanding how consumers make use of the available channels throughout the different stages of the purchasing process (*spillover effect*) (Gensler et al., 2012). Channel lock-in occurs when the attitude toward using one channel in a stage has an effect on using the same channel in the following stage (Verhoef, Neslin, & Vroomen, 2007).

2 Objectives

The study investigates the relation between channel preference and spillover effect—and more particularly lock-in effect—in multi-channel retailing, in order to analyze, explain and understand how consumers use different shopping channels—offline shopping, and online shopping in three different channels: web, mobile and social networks—along the shopping process. Based on the literature review, the research posits the following hypotheses: **(H1)** The presence of lock-in effect is more likely to occur among consumers with offline channel preference than among consumers with online or digital channel preference; **(H2)** Lock-in effects will be more pronounced among consumers with higher intensity of channel preference; **(H3a)** The presence of lock-in effect is lower when activities involving product returns and exchanges are included, regardless of purchasing

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channel preference; and **(H3b)** The presence of lock-in effect is lower when activities involving customer service and support are included, regardless of purchasing channel preference

3 Methods

Responses from a representative sample of 432 Spanish clothing and apparel shoppers help test the research hypotheses. The questionnaire includes demographic segmentation, channel preference and intensity of channel preference. Lock-in is inferred from the channel preference statement of respondents. The research differentiates between online and offline shoppers, and considers three scenarios: (Sc1) inclusion of pre-purchase, purchase and delivery/pick-up only; (Sc2) inclusion of returns and exchanges; (Sc3) inclusion of customer service.

4 Results

Using an independent t-test between consumers with preference for online and offline shopping, the results only support H1 partially (in Sc2 and Sc3). Observation of the value and significance of bivariate correlations between lock-in effect and intensity of channel preference supports H2 for the global sample and offline shoppers, but not for online shoppers. The results of a paired-samples t-test support H3a and H3b in the online channel, and only partially in the offline channel.

5 Conclusion

The study provides a better understanding of channel preference, measuring and analyzing lock-in effect. The results confirm the reduction of lock-in effect as more shopping activities are incorporated. The number of single-channel users in the offline channel remains stable, but multi-channel behaviors increase in the online channel after inclusion of post-purchase activities. In the absence of any trouble, online shoppers follow a single-channel use behavior, turning to use other channels when they encounter some problem. The findings suggest that online shoppers tend to solve their problems using the offline channel for returns and exchanges, or to contact customer support by telephone or in-store. The rates of use and preference for purchase using mobile channels and social networks still remain very low.

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