

Understanding the Factors Influencing Consumer Behavior in the Digital Economy: A Case Study of Online Shopping Trends

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the multifaceted factors influencing consumer behavior in the context of the digital economy, with a specific focus on online shopping trends in Tehran. This qualitative research employed a case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of consumer behavior in digital marketplaces. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 27 participants, all active online shoppers residing in Tehran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, occupation, and shopping frequency. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The collected data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis with the aid of NVivo software. Open coding led to the development of subthemes and broader thematic categories reflecting the lived experiences and perceptions of digital consumers. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Technological Drivers of Online Shopping, including platform usability, payment flexibility, and security features; (2) Psychological and Emotional Factors, such as trust, shopping enjoyment, and perceived convenience; and (3) Economic and Market Conditions, including promotional strategies, price sensitivity, and product availability. Participants highlighted that ease of use, emotional engagement, social influence, and economic uncertainty significantly shaped their online shopping behaviors. Trust in the platform, prior experiences, and value-for-money perceptions were consistent motivators, while fear of fraud and delivery concerns acted as inhibitors. The study provides a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected technological, emotional, and economic factors influencing online consumer behavior in a developing economy. These insights can inform the development of user-centered digital platforms, localized marketing strategies, and consumer protection policies to enhance trust and engagement in e-commerce environments.

Keywords: consumer behavior; digital economy; online shopping; qualitative research; e-commerce; Tehran; user experience; trust; personalization; economic uncertainty

Introduction

The emergence of the digital economy has radically transformed consumer behavior, reshaping how individuals search for information, evaluate alternatives, and make purchasing decisions. This shift is primarily driven by the ubiquity of digital technologies, including e-commerce platforms, mobile applications, and artificial intelligence systems that streamline and personalize the shopping experience (Laudon & Traver, 2023). Online shopping, as one of the most prominent aspects of digital commerce, has seen exponential growth globally. According to data



Article history:
 Received 12 May 2024
 Revised 13 June 2024
 Accepted 25 June 2024
 Published online 01 July 2024

How to cite this article:

Bineshfar, N., & Tizmaghz, Z. (2024). Understanding the Factors Influencing Consumer Behavior in the Digital Economy: A Case Study of Online Shopping Trends. *Journal of Management and Business Solutions*, 2(3), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jmbs.2.3.4>



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from Statista (2023), global e-retail sales surpassed \$5.7 trillion in 2022 and are projected to continue growing rapidly, indicating a fundamental behavioral transition from physical to digital marketplaces. However, despite this significant transformation, the underlying factors that influence consumer behavior in digital environments remain complex, multi-dimensional, and context-dependent.

Consumer behavior in the digital economy is not solely shaped by traditional marketing variables such as price, product, promotion, and place, but also by technological, psychological, and socio-economic dynamics that interact in novel ways (Kotler et al., 2022). For instance, the integration of AI-based recommendation engines and personalized content has enabled digital platforms to anticipate consumer preferences and influence decision-making patterns more directly than ever before (Grewal et al., 2020). At the same time, consumers exhibit varying degrees of trust, digital literacy, and emotional engagement with digital interfaces, all of which affect their willingness to complete transactions online (Zarouali et al., 2021). These interactions suggest that consumer decision-making in the digital context is increasingly influenced by non-tangible, experience-based factors such as convenience, perceived risk, social validation, and interface usability (Chen et al., 2019).

Understanding these dynamics is particularly relevant in regions undergoing rapid digitalization but with heterogeneous user bases, such as Iran. Although Iranian consumers have increasingly adopted digital platforms, the transition from traditional to online commerce is marked by infrastructural, economic, and cultural challenges (Ghazinoory et al., 2021). The adoption of digital marketplaces in Iran has been influenced by both local innovations—such as the growth of indigenous platforms like Digikala and Bamilo—and constraints such as international sanctions, unstable currency, and varying levels of internet penetration (Zarei et al., 2020). Thus, investigating consumer behavior in such settings offers valuable insights not only for understanding digital shopping behaviors but also for contextualizing global consumer trends in emerging economies.

The technological architecture of digital platforms plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer experiences. Research indicates that ease of navigation, mobile responsiveness, fast loading times, and secure payment systems are key determinants of consumer satisfaction and purchase intention (Pappas et al., 2017). Platform usability, often defined by interface design and functionality, influences how quickly and comfortably consumers can find and purchase items. When digital platforms reduce friction and cognitive load, they enhance trust and encourage repeat visits (Rose et al., 2012). In contrast, poorly optimized platforms create frustration, diminish trust, and may lead to cart abandonment. These findings suggest that technology is not a neutral tool but a dynamic medium that mediates consumer perceptions, emotions, and actions.

Equally critical are the psychological and emotional factors that drive online shopping behaviors. In the absence of face-to-face interaction, consumers rely on digital cues such as user reviews, ratings, and visual content to assess credibility and quality (Baek et al., 2020). Perceived risk—be it financial, product-related, or privacy-oriented—remains a significant barrier to online purchases. Studies have shown that trust in the platform, brand reputation, and secure data management practices can mitigate these concerns (Gefen et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2008). Moreover, emotional motivators such as the enjoyment of browsing, instant gratification, and social influence from peers or influencers further shape consumer behavior in digital contexts (Verhoef et al., 2009). These psychological dimensions are amplified by algorithm-driven content that can either enhance or disrupt the shopping experience, making emotional engagement a key area of focus for digital marketers.

In addition to technological and psychological variables, broader economic and market conditions also influence consumer behavior in the digital economy. Economic uncertainty, inflation, job instability, and changing disposable

income levels are external factors that condition purchasing decisions. In times of economic volatility, consumers may become more price-sensitive, seek promotional offers, or postpone non-essential purchases (Sheth, 2020). Moreover, the rise of competitive marketplaces enables consumers to easily compare prices and switch between vendors, thereby reinforcing market efficiency but also increasing brand-switching behavior (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In regions like Iran, where inflation and currency fluctuation are persistent challenges, these economic considerations become even more pronounced in shaping online shopping trends.

Importantly, digital consumer behavior is also influenced by cultural and social dimensions that mediate technology use. Social norms, family expectations, and community-based trust can either facilitate or hinder digital adoption (Hofstede, 2011). For instance, in more collectivist cultures, decisions may be influenced heavily by family or peer group opinions, leading to increased attention to user-generated content and social media endorsements (Yoon, 2009). In Iran, the integration of social influence with online shopping is evident in the growing role of influencers and online reviews in consumer decision-making (Yaghoubi & Yazdanpanah, 2017). This intersection of cultural, technological, and economic factors presents a unique landscape for understanding consumer behavior in hybrid markets—those simultaneously influenced by global technologies and local dynamics.

Despite a growing body of research on digital consumer behavior, several gaps remain. Much of the existing literature is either theoretical or based on quantitative data, which may not capture the deeper emotional and experiential aspects of online shopping (Belk, 2013). Qualitative studies, especially those focusing on consumer narratives, motivations, and lived experiences, are still underrepresented—particularly in non-Western contexts. A case study approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate digital platforms, make purchase decisions, and interpret their shopping experiences in light of personal, social, and contextual variables.

This study seeks to fill this gap by adopting a qualitative case study approach to explore the factors influencing online shopping behavior in Tehran. Through semi-structured interviews with 27 active online shoppers, the research investigates how technological, psychological, and economic factors interplay to shape consumer behavior in Iran's digital economy. The use of NVivo for data analysis enables the identification of themes and patterns grounded in participants' experiences, offering a rich and context-sensitive understanding of emerging shopping trends. By examining these phenomena in a rapidly digitizing yet economically volatile setting, this study not only contributes to the global discourse on consumer behavior but also informs localized strategies for digital commerce growth in similar environments.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the underlying factors that influence consumer behavior in the context of the digital economy, with a particular focus on online shopping trends. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for capturing the nuanced perceptions, motivations, and experiences of individuals navigating digital marketplaces. The research employed a case study methodology to provide an in-depth understanding of consumer behavior within a real-life context.

A total of 27 participants were selected from Tehran using purposive sampling. These participants were chosen based on their active engagement in online shopping over the past year across a range of platforms, including domestic and international e-commerce sites. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender,

occupation, and frequency of online purchases to capture a broad spectrum of consumer perspectives. All participants voluntarily consented to participate in the study, and ethical considerations including confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted exclusively through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both guided inquiry and the flexibility to explore emerging themes in depth. An interview guide was developed based on a review of existing literature on digital consumer behavior, encompassing themes such as trust in online platforms, personalization, digital literacy, promotional strategies, and customer experience. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face or via video conferencing platforms, depending on the participant's preference and availability.

Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, the point at which no new conceptual insights were emerging from additional interviews. This criterion was met after the 27th interview, confirming the adequacy of the sample size for robust qualitative analysis.

Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a thematic analysis using NVivo software (version 12). The analysis process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Open coding was applied initially to identify key phrases and concepts within the data, which were then grouped into subthemes and broader thematic categories through iterative comparison.

The credibility of the data analysis was enhanced through member checking, in which selected participants were invited to review and confirm the accuracy of the coded interpretations. Additionally, peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts was conducted to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the thematic structure.

This analytical approach enabled a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping consumer behavior in digital commerce settings, offering insights into user preferences, perceived risks, technological influences, and emotional drivers of online purchasing decisions.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Technological Drivers of Online Shopping

Platform Usability:

Participants emphasized that a platform's ease of navigation, intuitive interface, and efficient search tools significantly affect their shopping behavior. Several interviewees cited poor layout or complicated category structures as deterrents. One participant explained, "If I can't find what I'm looking for in two clicks, I just close the app." The seamlessness of the mobile and desktop experience was repeatedly described as a major differentiator between platforms.

Payment Flexibility:

The availability of multiple payment options—such as debit cards, digital wallets, and installment plans—emerged as a key facilitator. Consumers appreciated platforms offering secure and diversified methods. A

participant stated, “I only use sites that accept Shetab card payments and allow me to pay in parts. Otherwise, I won’t even consider the product.” The ease of financial transaction plays a vital role in final purchase decisions.

Security and Privacy:

Many users voiced concerns about the protection of personal and financial data. Trust in encrypted transactions and visible security badges were mentioned as confidence boosters. One participant shared, “If I don’t see that lock symbol or ‘https,’ I immediately think it’s a scam.” Such perceptions shape trust and ultimately affect platform selection and user loyalty.

Personalization and AI:

Personalized experiences powered by AI were described as both useful and influential. Interviewees mentioned product recommendations, chatbot assistance, and tailored ads as helpful in streamlining decision-making. “The system remembers what I like and shows me similar stuff. It’s like having a personal shopper,” noted one consumer. However, some also expressed discomfort with overly invasive suggestions.

App Performance and Features:

Fast app loading times, live order tracking, and one-click purchases were frequently praised. These elements contributed to a sense of efficiency and modernity. A participant said, “When the app lags or crashes, it feels unprofessional. I prefer apps that load fast and show me real-time delivery.”

Technological Accessibility:

Respondents noted that digital inequality—such as poor internet speed or outdated devices—affects who can shop online. The accessibility of apps on low-spec phones and their adaptability to limited bandwidth was highlighted. One user mentioned, “My mom has an old phone, and most apps don’t work on it. So she only uses one site that’s lightweight and doesn’t crash.”

Automation and Notifications:

Automated features such as order updates, price drop alerts, and restock notifications were seen as helpful nudges. They created a sense of control and engagement. As one participant explained, “Sometimes I forget about the things in my cart. But when the app reminds me that something’s back in stock or on sale, I often go back and buy it.”

Theme 2: Psychological and Emotional Factors

Trust and Brand Loyalty:

Trust in the platform and previous positive experiences significantly influenced repeat behavior. Familiarity and reliability were frequently cited. One respondent said, “I always shop from sites I know well. New ones? I don’t trust them unless someone I know recommends it.” Trust was closely linked to perceived authenticity and service quality.

Perceived Convenience:

Participants emphasized the convenience of online shopping—citing the ability to shop anytime, avoid traffic, and browse from home—as major drivers. “At midnight, when my child is asleep, I can shop in peace. That’s something malls can’t offer,” shared a mother of two. The time-saving nature of online shopping was repeatedly praised.

Fear of Online Fraud:

Many participants shared apprehension regarding scams, counterfeit goods, and undelivered items. These fears were rooted in either personal experience or shared stories. “One time I ordered shoes and got a completely

different item. I had to fight for weeks to get a refund,” stated one consumer. These concerns affected not only initial trust but long-term loyalty.

Shopping Enjoyment:

The pleasurable aspect of browsing and discovering new products online was highlighted by many participants. Several described the process as a form of stress relief or entertainment. “Scrolling through the app is my version of window shopping. It relaxes me after a long day,” commented a university student.

Social Influence:

The impact of social media, peer reviews, and influencer endorsements on purchase decisions was clearly evident. Users often acted on recommendations from people in their networks. One participant stated, “If I see an influencer using a product and many people vouch for it in the comments, I usually end up buying it.”

Perceived Value for Money:

Consumers evaluated deals, offers, and product quality to assess whether purchases were worth it. Price comparison across platforms was a common strategy. A participant noted, “I’ll check three or four sites before buying. Sometimes one has a better deal or a bundle offer that makes it more appealing.”

Theme 3: Economic and Market Conditions

Promotional Strategies:

Sales campaigns, discounts, and loyalty programs were strong motivators for engagement. Flash sales and free shipping were mentioned most often. “When there’s a ‘Buy One Get One Free’ offer or free delivery, I feel more tempted to shop, even if I wasn’t planning to,” shared a participant.

Price Sensitivity:

Many respondents described themselves as price-conscious and actively seeking value for money. Budget limitations shaped not only what they bought but how often. One shopper shared, “I only buy when there’s a discount. Otherwise, I wait. Everything’s more expensive these days.”

Marketplace Competition:

Participants compared several e-commerce sites before making decisions, seeking better prices, more reliable vendors, or faster shipping. “Before clicking buy, I check at least two other websites to make sure I’m not being overcharged,” one participant explained.

Product Availability:

Consistent stock and restocking speed influenced platform preference. Complaints about “out of stock” labels were common. “When I want something and it’s not available again and again, I stop checking that site,” said a frustrated respondent.

Economic Uncertainty:

Concerns about inflation, job insecurity, and unstable currency rates led to more cautious spending. People expressed increased deliberation before buying. One participant stated, “I’ve started limiting my online shopping to essentials. Prices are unpredictable, and my job isn’t as secure as it was before.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to uncover the key factors influencing consumer behavior in online shopping within the context of Iran's digital economy. Through thematic analysis of 27 semi-structured interviews, three overarching themes emerged: technological drivers of online shopping, psychological and emotional factors, and economic and

market conditions. These themes not only align with the broader literature on digital consumer behavior but also offer localized insights into how Iranian consumers navigate digital commerce platforms under specific cultural, infrastructural, and economic constraints.

Participants emphasized the significance of platform usability, payment flexibility, and security in shaping their online shopping behaviors. This finding resonates strongly with previous research indicating that ease of use and interface design significantly influence perceived usefulness and satisfaction in digital environments (Rose et al., 2012). For instance, fast-loading pages, intuitive navigation, and mobile optimization have been shown to positively affect consumer trust and reduce cart abandonment rates (Pappas et al., 2017). In the present study, participants frequently cited frustrations with slow or unstable apps as reasons for switching platforms, confirming the importance of technology-driven user experience in e-commerce.

Moreover, the integration of AI-based personalization features, such as tailored recommendations and chatbots, was perceived favorably by many consumers. This aligns with research by Grewal et al. (2020), who emphasized the role of digital personalization in enhancing customer engagement and perceived relevance. However, the current study also revealed ambivalence, with some participants expressing discomfort over what they perceived as excessive or intrusive data tracking. This supports findings from Zarouali et al. (2021), who noted that while personalization increases engagement, it can also heighten privacy concerns, particularly in regions where trust in digital platforms may be fragile.

Security and payment options were also highly influential. Participants expressed preference for platforms that offered trusted, multi-modal payment systems, reflecting the importance of financial flexibility. Previous studies have identified trust in secure payment mechanisms as a critical determinant of online purchase intention, especially in developing markets (Kim et al., 2008; Gefen et al., 2003). This is particularly relevant in the Iranian context, where geopolitical factors and sanctions limit access to international payment solutions, reinforcing the need for localized digital infrastructure.

The psychological underpinnings of online shopping behavior were another major theme. Trust and loyalty toward familiar brands emerged as strong predictors of purchasing behavior, a finding well documented in the literature. For instance, Baek et al. (2020) emphasized that brand trust mediates the relationship between perceived risk and purchase intention, especially when consumers rely on online reviews and reputation as proxies for quality. In this study, participants frequently cited positive prior experiences and peer recommendations as motivators for repeat purchases, consistent with Verhoef et al. (2009), who found that emotional connection and brand familiarity are key to customer retention in multichannel environments.

Perceived convenience was another recurring subtheme. Participants appreciated the ability to shop at any time and avoid traffic or long queues. This finding is consistent with studies that highlight convenience as a central advantage of online retail, particularly for urban populations with demanding schedules (Laudon & Traver, 2023). Additionally, the study uncovered an important emotional dimension—many participants described the act of browsing as a pleasurable and even therapeutic activity. This supports Belk's (2013) argument that digital shopping can serve expressive and hedonic purposes beyond mere utility.

At the same time, the fear of online fraud, scams, and counterfeit products was prevalent among respondents. These concerns align with Kim et al. (2008) and Yoon (2009), who found that perceived risk, particularly in terms of financial loss and product misrepresentation, can significantly inhibit digital purchasing. This concern was especially salient in Iran, where participants referenced prior negative experiences and lack of trust in some local

platforms. Trust-building mechanisms such as buyer protection policies, third-party verification, and transparent return procedures were cited as mitigating factors.

Social influence also played a powerful role in shaping decisions. Influencer endorsements, peer reviews, and family recommendations were all mentioned as influential. This aligns with Hofstede's (2011) cultural theory, which characterizes Iran as relatively collectivist, suggesting that interpersonal relationships and group norms strongly shape individual behaviors. Yaghoubi and Yazdanpanah (2017) also confirmed that social cues, including social media influence, are among the strongest predictors of e-commerce adoption in Iran, a finding mirrored in this study.

The economic landscape also emerged as a crucial contextual factor. Participants repeatedly cited inflation, currency fluctuation, and income insecurity as drivers of increased price sensitivity. Many respondents indicated that they postponed purchases, waited for sales, or relied on discount alerts before making decisions. These behaviors support Sheth's (2020) assertion that economic shocks, such as those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or sanctions, result in more cautious and deliberate consumer spending.

Promotional strategies such as flash sales, coupon codes, and loyalty rewards were strong motivators for action, particularly among younger consumers. This aligns with findings by Lemon and Verhoef (2016), who noted that price promotions are particularly effective in competitive digital marketplaces. Moreover, participants engaged in cross-platform comparisons to identify the best deal—indicating high market fluidity and low platform loyalty in the absence of differentiated value offerings. These findings suggest that in volatile economic conditions, value-seeking becomes a dominant behavioral strategy.

Product availability was another important consideration. Many participants expressed frustration with stock inconsistencies and slow restocking, which often led them to abandon certain platforms. This is consistent with the findings of Pappas et al. (2017), who emphasized that fulfillment reliability is essential to maintaining customer satisfaction. In the Iranian context, where logistical challenges and import restrictions complicate inventory management, ensuring product availability is a key determinant of customer retention.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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