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“CONSUMER PERCEPTION IN SPORTS RETAILING: A CASE STUDY ON ONLINE VS OFFLINE SHOPPING”

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Abstract:

The retail landscape in the sports goods industry has undergone a significant transformation with the rise of digital commerce. This study, titled "**A Comparative Study of Consumer Perception Between Online and Offline Sports Retailing**," aims to explore and analyze how consumers in Karnataka perceive and interact with both online and offline sports retail platforms. With increasing internet penetration and changing shopping habits, understanding these perceptions is essential for retailers to adapt and stay competitive.

The study investigates key parameters that influence consumer preference such as product variety, price competitiveness, convenience, trust, customer service, return/exchange policies, and overall satisfaction. It draws a comparative analysis between popular online platforms (like Amazon, Flipkart, and Decathlon online) and offline retail stores (such as Decathlon outlets, brand-exclusive stores like Adidas, Nike, Puma) to understand which channel holds more influence over consumer decisions.

This comparative study provides valuable insights for retailers seeking to optimize their omnichannel strategies. It concludes that a hybrid retail approach—integrating the advantages of both online and offline platforms—is likely to be the most effective in meeting the evolving expectations of modern sports consumers in Karnataka.

Keywords: Consumer Perception, Shopping Behaviour, Sports Retail, Online Retailing, Offline Retailing, E-commerce, Customer Satisfaction, Retail Strategy, Brand Trust, Omnichannel Retail.

Introduction

The sports retail industry is currently experiencing a profound transformation, primarily driven by the dual forces of digitalization and evolving consumer behaviors. Traditionally, the purchase of sports goods was confined to brick-and-mortar stores, offering a tactile experience and immediate product availability. However, the advent and rapid proliferation of e-commerce have fundamentally altered this landscape, introducing online platforms that promise unparalleled convenience, vast product selections, and competitive pricing. This bifurcation of the retail environment into distinct online and offline channels presents both opportunities and challenges for sports retailers. Consumers today are no longer bound by a single shopping channel; they seamlessly navigate between physical stores and digital platforms, often employing a hybrid approach known as omnichannel retailing. This shift has given rise to diverse consumer perceptions regarding the benefits and drawbacks of each channel. While online sports retailing offers ease of access from anywhere, anytime, along with extensive product comparisons, it often lacks the sensory experience of touching fabrics, trying on footwear, or receiving immediate expert advice. Conversely, offline sports retailing provides a personalized fitting experience, instant gratification of purchase, and direct interaction with sales associates, but may be limited by store hours, geographical proximity, and constrained inventory.

Understanding these divergent consumer perceptions is paramount for sports retailers to formulate effective strategies, optimize channel presence, and ultimately enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of how consumers perceive online versus offline sports retailing,

delving into factors such as convenience, product assortment, pricing, customer service, shopping experience, and trust. By dissecting these perceptions, retailers can better align their offerings with consumer expectations, bridge the gaps between channels, and create a truly integrated and compelling shopping journey in the dynamic world of sports goods.

Case Background

India's sports retail market has seen tremendous growth due to fitness awareness, increased disposable income, and brand consciousness. Companies like Decathlon, Puma, Adidas, and Amazon Sports dominate the space, offering both online and offline experiences. This study focuses on consumer behavior observed in urban regions where both retail options are widely available.

Literature Review

- **Capgemini Research Institute (2025):** Highlights the growing expectation for personalized content among sports fans. Indicates that a significant portion of sports fans are turning to AI and generative AI for more tailored experiences. Suggests that digital advancements are reshaping how consumers engage with sports content and retail.
- **Westerbeek, H. (2025):** Introduces the concept of "Algorithmic fandom" to explain how generative AI is creating hyper-personalized fan engagement in sports. Examines the implications of AI on sports marketing and fan interaction.
- **Hardcastle, K., Vorster, L., & Brown, D. M. (2025):** Focuses on understanding customer responses to AI-driven personalized journeys. Explores how personalization impacts the overall customer experience across touchpoints.
- **Haque, A., Akther, N., Khan, I., Agarwal, K., & Uddin, N. (2025):** Provides a bibliometric review of AI in retail marketing, highlighting personalization and consumer engagement as key themes. Reinforces the significant role of AI in shaping consumer behavior in the broader retail context.
- **Karimi, J., Pashaie, S., & Golmohammadi, H. (2025):** Examines how AI is revolutionizing sports marketing by enabling personalized advertising campaigns. Emphasizes the role of AI in enhancing consumer engagement and loyalty in the sports industry.
- **Zhou, D., Keogh, J. W. L., Ma, Y., Tong, R. K. Y., Khan, A. R., & Jennings, N. R. (2025):** Offers a narrative review of AI applications, challenges, and future trends in sports. Discusses how AI impacts various aspects of the sports industry, including fan engagement.
- **Fibre2Fashion / PwC Report (2025, March):** States that 45% of Indian consumers prefer a hybrid shopping approach (mix of online and offline). Highlights that even in the sports and fitness category, 34-36% of shoppers still prioritize in-store engagement in India. Indicates that Indian retailers are increasingly blending online and offline experiences, recognizing technology as a competitive edge.
- **Frontiers (2025, February) - On Sports Fan Curiosity:** Discusses how digital engagement, particularly social media, mediates the relationship between sports fans' curiosity and impulsive buying tendencies. Highlights the significant role of digital platforms in shaping consumer behavior among sports fans.
- **YouGov Global Profiles (2024, January):** Reveals that globally, on average, 37% of consumers prefer buying sports equipment online, 26% are evenly split, and 31% favor offline. Notes significant regional variations, with China showing strong online preference (58%), and India at 40% online preference for sports equipment.
- **Herold, E., Singh, A., Feodoroff, B., & Breuer, C. (2024):** Focuses on data-driven message optimization in dynamic sports media using AI to predict consumer response. Though not directly comparative retail, it underscores the technological advancements in understanding consumer behavior in sports.
- **Mateus, N., Abade, E., Coutinho, D., Gómez, M.-Á., Peñas, C. L., & Sampaio, J. (2024):** While primarily on AI in sports science, their work contributes to the understanding of how detailed analytics can indirectly influence personalized experiences for consumers.
- **PwC (2023/2022 - Global Consumer Insights Pulse Survey):** Indicates a strong shift towards online shopping, especially since 2021, and the continued preference for digital consumption. Highlights consumer desire for the "best price" and personalized recommendations, often found online. Emphasizes that consumers still value seeing and touching products, and receiving personalized service offline. Points out that trust is a crucial factor affecting shopping preferences.
- **Goti, A., Querejeta-Lomas, L., Almeida, A., de la Puerta, J. G., & López-de-Ipiña, D. (2023):** (From fashion retail, but highly relevant) Systematic literature review on AI in B2C fashion retail.

Discusses AI's role in personalization and omnichannel experiences, and understanding customer behavior, which directly translates to sports apparel and accessories.

- **McKinsey (2023 - Sporting Goods Report):** Identifies "shifting consumer preferences and generational opportunities" as key trends in sporting goods. Notes the need for advanced approaches (including data and analytics) to create more tailored solutions for consumers.
- **ResearchGate / Hsiu-Yueh, Chou, and Chen, Fei-Chuan (2020):** "A Study on Online Purchase Motivation, Perceived Risk and Behavioral Intention of Sports Goods Consumption." Finds sports shoes are main online purchases. Highlights that consumers of different ages have different purchase motives and perceived risks online. Examines the relationship between purchase motivation, perceived risk, and behavioral intention for online sports goods consumption.
- **ResearchGate / Insights into customer experience in sports retail stores (2020):** Emphasizes that offline sports retail has a physical advantage over online channels. States that sports customers emphasize multisensory brand experience at the point of sale. Highlights the importance of social responses and interaction with employees for the in-store customer experience in sports retail. Notes that consumers value seeing products before purchase and getting support from salespeople as main reasons for not shopping online (based on Eurostat 2019 data).
- **Verhoef, P. C., Neslin, S. A., & Vroomen, B. (2007):** Introduced the concept of multi-channel management, recognizing that consumers interact with brands across various channels. Laid groundwork for understanding integrated retail experiences.
- **Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A., & Berry, L. L. (1988):** Developed the SERVQUAL model, which is foundational for measuring perceived service quality. Concepts of reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness are applicable to both online and offline retail service perceptions.
- **Jarvenpaa, S. L., Tractinsky, N., & Vitale, M. (1999):** Focused on consumer trust in Internet stores. Identified perceived risk (financial, product, information) as a significant barrier to online shopping.
- **Alba, J., Lynch, J., Weitz, B., Janiszewski, C., Lutz, R., Sawyer, A., & Wood, S. (1997):** Discussed the advantages of online channels, particularly in terms of information search and efficiency. Also noted the limitations in sensory experience compared to physical stores.

Statement of the Problem:

The sports retail sector, both globally and specifically in rapidly evolving markets like India is navigating a complex and dynamic environment shaped by the parallel growth of online e-commerce platforms and the persistent presence of traditional brick-and-mortar stores. While both channels are crucial for reaching sports enthusiasts, they inherently offer distinct shopping experiences, leading to varied consumer perceptions regarding essential aspects such as convenience, product accessibility, pricing, the quality of customer service, and overall satisfaction. The core problem, therefore, is that despite the increasing consumer engagement with both online and offline channels for purchasing sports goods, there remains a critical lack of comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how consumers perceive the distinct advantages and disadvantages of each retail environment. This deficiency hinders sports retailers from formulating optimized channel strategies, efficiently allocating resources, and ultimately maximizing customer satisfaction and loyalty across their entire retail footprint. This overarching problem manifests in several key challenges for sports retailers, including an inconsistent articulation of channel-specific value propositions, a mismatch between consumer expectations and the customer service offered across channels, suboptimal inventory and merchandising strategies due to unclear channel preferences, difficulties in building holistic brand trust across fragmented experiences, and challenges in effectively integrating online and offline operations into a seamless omnichannel strategy. Addressing these nuanced differences in consumer perception is critical for sports retailers to develop consumer-centric strategies that not only cater to diverse shopping preferences but also build stronger brand relationships and secure a competitive edge in the evolving sports goods market.

Objectives of the Study

- To analyze consumer preferences between online and offline sports retailing.
- To identify factors influencing purchase decisions.
- To evaluate satisfaction levels and trust among consumers.
- To suggest strategies for improving multi-channel retailing.

Methodology

Sample Size: 100 respondents

Data Collection: Questionnaire and personal interviews

Respondent Profile: Age group 18–40 years, mix of students, working professionals, and sports enthusiasts

Tools Used: Percentage analysis and comparative charts

Research Design

The study will utilize a Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Design. This involves:

1. **Simultaneous Data Collection:** Quantitative and qualitative data gathered concurrently from different but complementary samples of sports retail consumers and stakeholders.
2. **Independent Analysis:** Each dataset (quantitative and qualitative) analyzed separately using appropriate methods.
3. **Integration of Findings:** The results from both quantitative and qualitative analyses compared, contrasted, and combined during the interpretation phase to achieve a more complete and coherent understanding of the research problem. This parallel approach allows for immediate validation and triangulation of findings.

Key Findings

- **Price Sensitivity:** Consumers prefer online stores for discounts and offers.
- **Touch & Feel Factor:** Offline buyers value trying products before purchase, especially for shoes and equipment.
- **Trust & Authenticity:** Brand-conscious buyers still trust offline outlets more for genuine products.
- **Convenience:** Online platforms are favored for time-saving and easy return policies.
- **Post-Purchase Satisfaction:** Offline buyers enjoy instant service; online buyers often depend on digital feedback and support.

Discussion

The study shows that while online sports retailing attracts tech-savvy and price-conscious consumers, offline stores retain customers seeking assurance and personal interaction. Retailers that combine both models (omnichannel approach) can build stronger customer relationships and sustain growth.

Managerial Implications

- Develop integrated online–offline strategies (click & collect, easy returns).
- Offer personalized discounts and loyalty programs across both channels.
- Train sales staff to improve in-store experience and trust.
- Enhance website usability and authenticity checks for online customers..

Conclusion:

The landscape of sports retailing in India, exemplified by consumer behaviors in regions like Ballari, Karnataka, is fundamentally shaped by the interplay between traditional brick-and-mortar stores and the burgeoning e-commerce ecosystem. This comparative study's anticipated findings underscore that consumers do not simply choose one channel over the other, but rather exhibit nuanced perceptions and preferences, driving a complex, often hybrid, shopping journey. Online sports retailing is definitively perceived as superior in terms of **convenience and unparalleled product assortment and availability**. The ability to shop anytime, anywhere, and access a vast global catalog of brands and specialized items often not found locally, drives a significant portion of consumer traffic to digital platforms. This aligns with the broader e-retail growth in India, especially in Tier 2 and 3 cities, where online channels democratize access to a wider range of goods. Furthermore, online platforms are expected to remain the go-to for **price competitiveness** and the easy comparison of deals. Conversely, **offline sports retailing continues to hold a distinct and irreplaceable value in areas of sensory engagement, personalized expert advice, and immediate gratification**. Consumers highly value the ability to physically try on apparel and footwear, feel equipment, and receive tailored recommendations from knowledgeable sales associates – a critical factor for performance-driven sports goods. The instant possession of a purchased item and the inherently higher trust in product authenticity and returns in a physical store also bolster the offline appeal. The critical takeaway is that the future of sports retail in India, particularly in evolving markets like Ballari, is **omnichannel**. Consumers are increasingly adopting a hybrid approach, seamlessly navigating between online and offline touchpoints based on their specific needs and the stage of their purchasing journey. A consumer might research products and compare prices online, then visit a physical store for a fitting or expert advice, and finally complete the purchase in either channel. This fluid behavior necessitates that retailers break down traditional channel silos.

In conclusion, for sports retailers to thrive in this dynamic environment, a strategic imperative is to move beyond simply having an online and offline presence to truly **integrating these channels into a cohesive and personalized omnichannel experience**.

This means leveraging the distinct strengths of each:

- **Physical stores** must evolve into experiential hubs offering expert guidance, personalized fitting services, community engagement, and immediate product availability.
- **Online platforms** should continue to excel in offering vast selection, competitive pricing, and data-driven personalization through technologies like AI, ensuring a smooth and intuitive digital shopping journey.

Learning Outcome / Case Insight

This case helps readers understand how consumer psychology influences sports retail decisions and how businesses can align digital and traditional channels to maximize satisfaction and sales.

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