

Original Research Article

The perks of online selling: shared experiences and defying challenges

ABSTRACT

Aim: This study aimed at exploring and documenting the experiences of online sellers and determine their struggles on online selling amidst the pandemic.

Research design: This qualitative research utilized phenomenology as strategy of inquiry to better understand the experiences and challenges of online sellers.

Place and Duration of Study: The study was conducted during the pandemic in a state university in the Philippines.

Methodology: The study used purposive sampling involving eight participants who have been doing part-time online selling during the pandemic. These participants got engaged in the sphere of online selling to gain additional profit for themselves and family.

Results: Online sellers were faced with various challenges as they do their sphere. They need to deal with impatient and inconsiderate buyers, unpredictable stocks and prices, competition in the market and unguaranteed quality of items. But despite of these challenges and struggles, online sellers describe online selling not only as a platform for marketing but a tool to gain new friends and widen their market horizons. It has also become a source of fun and income. Online selling also tests sellers to strategize and use their skills and creativity so they can be successful at it.

Conclusions: Online selling can be a decent opportunity and a challenging endeavor that one can venture on. This became even more challenging during the occurrence of pandemic but it also offered additional profit and advantages for those doing it.

Keywords: Online Selling, Challenges and Struggles, Experiences, E-Commerce, Pandemic

1.INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus pandemic has taken a heavy toll on the daily lives of every Filipino as it challenged every Juan to strategize for persistence and survival. Though Filipino workers are eager to provide for their families, the Philippine Government implemented the strictest and longest lockdowns in the world in May 2020 due to the rapid increase of COVID-cases and caused millions of Filipinos become jobless. To note, more than 2.5 million Filipinos have lost their jobs during the lockdown due to the pandemic, and it is believed that more would be losing their jobs at the end of the year (Alindogan, 2020).

Crises such as this pandemic were responded to by humans differently (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). The global spread of COVID-19 has been accompanied by a lot of uncertainties and difficulties. During uncertainties such as this, risky situations to which people have no control of, we endeavor so we can feel like we have some control. When pandemic disturbs the world, there were restrictions in the movement of people as strict home quarantine was observed in all households, and residents were limited to accessing essential goods and services, and even going to work as only few offices were permitted to operate (IATF, 2020). Even after community quarantines were lifted and guidelines towards battling the pandemic were ease, there were people who were not comfortable to go out and access goods and services. These people were avoiding public places and their usual shopping routines were transformed into a “new normal.” To get essentials, people prefer online shopping. Thus, online selling boomed.

Online selling is a form of e-commerce which allows stores or business people to sell goods and services to consumers using the internet (Singh & Sailo, 2013) and has become the “new normal.” It is becoming increasingly popular since it offers convenience and enjoyment among consumers (Childers, et al, 2001 as mentioned by Sarkar, 2017). Further, since the internet is greatly embedded in the social fabric of countries in the world (Rodríguez, T. & Trujillo, E., 2014) and Filipinos are incredibly penetrated in social media especially on Facebook, it has been used not only to stay in contact with friends and peers (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007 as mentioned by Rodríguez & Trujillo, 2014) but also made as a platform for online selling.

Online selling can be advantageous to both sellers and consumers. It offers more information about items for sale as compared to what physical stores could offer; thus, consumers become informed without having to perform extra research themselves. Online stores carry more selection than the traditional brick-and-mortar stores; thus, consumers are offered a wide variety of selections. Online selling can be done 24 hours a day; thus, consumers can shop in convenience 24/7 (Gupta, Bansal & Bansal, 2013).

The bottom line is: while many Filipinos engage themselves on online selling so they can offer goods and services to consumers conveniently, there are risks and disadvantages on their part as they do sell online.

Thus, this study worked on the following:

1. Explore the valuable experiences and insights of online sellers in selling online; and
2. Describe the unforgettable and defying challenges of online selling amidst the pandemic

In the sphere of online shopping, shoppers with online shopping habits resort to using online behavioral response instead of their shopping to physical stores without thoughtfulness when they encounter shopping needs, which allow them to display habitual behaviors performed easily and quickly (Bhattacharjee, 2001). This concept is illustrated in the theoretical framework (see Figure 1).

In this time of pandemic, the need to satisfy one's needs is challenged by time, availability of establishments offering goods and services, resources and many others. However, despite this occurrence, the need to satisfy one's needs is still of great importance. They probably have worries and concerns, and even struggles in their homes and workplaces, but there is a need to fulfill their needs. Thus, people strategize so they can survive. They find ways so their needs are satisfied and met.

Further, in this time of COVID-19, people are moving to alternative ways to fulfill their shopping needs and online shopping is the best method. Aside from convenience, it becomes easier for people to buy groceries and almost everything in just a click of the mouse. With this, the ease of online shopping surely attracts more people to this mode of buying things (Gupta, Bansal & Bansal, 2013).

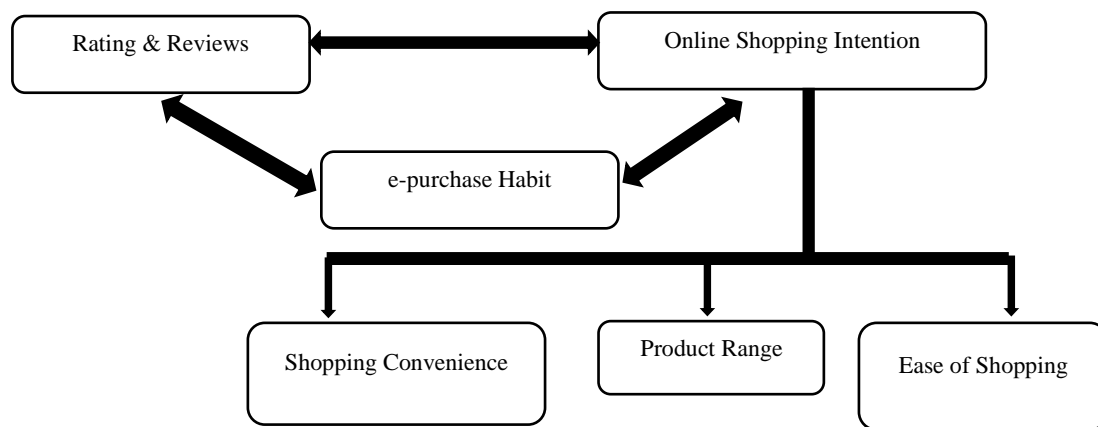


Figure 1. Kaljo Online Shopping Intention Model (Bhattacharjee, 2001)

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Design employing Phenomenology as strategy of inquiry was used in this research. This design enabled the researchers interpret and understand the lived experiences of online sellers as well as the challenges they faced as they do online selling despite the occurrence of COVID-19. Participants in this study who were selected using purposive sampling specifically chain-referral sampling were online sellers employed in a state university in the Philippines and had been doing e-commerce before and during the occurrence of the pandemic and continuously involve themselves in online selling amidst COVID-19. These online sellers were not full-time business people and used Facebook as a social media platform of selling. The participants were informed that they can withdraw anytime they want to if they felt uncomfortable in involving themselves in the study; this way, confidentiality was preserved. Most authors who discuss qualitative research design address the importance of ethical considerations (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted to allow observation of in-person interaction in a naturalistic setting while digging deeply on the social phenomenon. Informed consent for the interview was secured in consideration to proper research protocols. Interviews were transcribed, coded and recoded; and thematically analyzed. Transcriptions were read to participants to ensure that codes and recodes were accurate. The research team met to discuss the initial themes until final themes for the study that address the objectives of this research were created. Further, the analyses done in the research includes familiarization and organization, coding and recoding, and summarizing and interpreting (Ary, 2010). A word cloud which was produced through online

word cloud application was generated to give a visual taste of various experiences and challenges of online sellers on online selling. The words illustrated were lifted from the utterances of participants during the interviews conducted.

The participants considered for the study were those that could give clear explanation, honest answer, and reliable information about online selling. All of them were part-time online sellers.

Participant 1 is a female who did online selling before the pandemic but stopped due to the difficulty of delivering items. However, she pursued selling when pandemic started.

Participant 2 offers surprise services for all occasions. Boredom during lockdown pushed them to do selling online.

Participant 3 is a male who previously has a physical store managed by the family and decided to do online selling because the store closed during the occurrence of COVID-19.

Participant 4 is a female and indulge herself in online selling purposely to improve her marketing skills and widen her market perspective.

Participant 5 is a female and started online selling in 2017. She was encouraged to sell through Facebook posts of friends and acquaintances.

Participant 6 is a male and involve himself in online selling to gain profit and save even a little, and to socialize with others, as well.

Participant 7 is a female who has various items offered online; from apparels to household items, and many more.

Participant 8 is a female who started selling through text messages and eventually thrive business online. This section provides readers a sufficient information on the design, materials, methods, sampling procedures, statistical tools etc. used in the conduct of the study.

3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Online sellers encountered various experiences and faced challenges as they do online selling. Hence, to give an experiential savor about selling, few extracts from interviews were quoted. Queries were directed to explore their notable experiences and defying challenges on online selling.

From the data gathered, the following themes emerged:

A. Shared Experiences on Online Selling

It was noted that based on the experiences of online sellers, online selling was characterized as a platform to gain new friends and widen one's market horizons, can serve as a source of fun and income, and calls for someone's strategy, skills and creativity to become successful in doing this endeavor. These claims are further discussed in themes.

Theme 1: Online selling is an opportunity for strengthening friendships and widening market horizons

Online selling is not only considered as a business for people doing it. It is also considered as a channel to gain new friends and a platform to discover one's unseen skills in marketing. Since one needs to deal with people outside of work, his social skills are challenged as one needs to socially communicate well to online buyers as to price, quality and everything about items being sold. From selling to co-workers, friends and relatives, online selling widens one's market horizons as they get customers outside of these circles. Thus, their marketing skills are tested.

These claims were confirmed in various statements of participants:

"I started selling last February 2019. I decided to do it to widen my network and market. At first, I sell items to my friends and relatives, and eventually doing selling to other acquaintances. Now, I earned a lot from selling." (Participant 4)

"I am really not into selling since I am a shy type person. But one thing I proved of myself, even if I am not socialite at first, I can still do online selling. Online selling taught me to socialize with people." (Participant 1)

"Online selling becomes our kind of family bonding. We do it in the family." (Participant 5)

One participant started selling through text messages to friends and relatives but shifted to doing it online as she was amazed how other people sell in Facebook. She tried and discovered that doing it developed not only her marketing but social skills, as well.

"At first, I sell through texting, to my friends and relative. Now, I use social media to post the items I sell. I reach more people. I earn more." (Participant 8)

The narratives of participants confirm that online selling needs to have a positive atmosphere to gain most customers. Practically, the positive setting of retail helps to attract customers towards digital marketing based on which they develop loyalty towards the sector (Hasanat, M., et al., 2020). Since, online selling is done using social media platforms, it has allowed relationships forming between users from distinct backgrounds that resulted to tenacious social structure (Kapoor, et al., 2018). One way to imbibe positive vibes in online selling is to improve one's social skills so as to gain new friends in the marketplace. Further, social media applications such Facebook are highly influential in a myriad of settings, from purchasing/selling behaviors, entrepreneurship, political issues, to venture capitalism (Greenwood & Gopal 2015). Facebook enjoys the glorious position of being the market leader of the social media world (Statista 2017). Thus, this social media platform can be the best platform to widen one's market horizons because of its reach to the number of users around the globe.

Theme 2: Online Selling is experiencing fun while gaining additional income

The participants revealed that online selling is a source of fun and income. Aside from their usual income from salary, participants claimed that in online selling, one can get extra revenue from it. It can also be a source of fun and enjoyment. As one does their regular activities at work, an online seller pursues selling once they step outside of their work premises. This is not seen as a burden but an additional source of fun especially when one enjoys doing it.

Various participants exposed their enjoyment of earning a little in online selling.

"One does not earn a lot in online selling but when you save the profit, it can save your life. Online selling is just an extra source of income." (Participant 7)

"I earn extra by doing online selling. I can buy other things I need and want by using the profit I make from online selling." (Participant 5)

"When we started our surprise business, we got Php 15,000.00 on hand. From that, the money blew up." (Participant 2)

The statements emphasized that online selling can be an additional source of income and fun. Since social media has become the new platform, tools and technology for any business

to become successful (Evans, 2012), it has become a trend for sellers to do selling online. People are easily influenced to buy online by simply viewing reviews and comments of buyers about it (Singh, 2008). Social media marketing is getting more and more significant and popular because it brings a lot of modest advantage and benefits to the sellers (Zettelmeyer, 2000). Thus, this becomes an opportunity for sellers to gain profit from doing online selling since a lot of people are patronizing online shopping or buying.

Theme 3: Online selling requires one's strategy, skills and creativity

For one to become successful in online selling, one should be passionate about the endeavor, is patient about selling and is determined to do the online selling. Since many people are indulged into this kind of market, it is important that one strategizes to attract customers. Strategies range from trying out the items first before uploading it in social media to creating group chats for customers, from giving discounts to allowing net payables and many others. Skills and creativity are also contributory to successful online selling.

These things are reflected in various claims of participants:

"In a week, I post items I sell thrice. I make sure that I am friendly to the customers. I innovate. I strategize so customers will keep coming back. (Participant 4)

"Being unique is the key. It is also necessary that one's creativity is used. With that, customers will do the business again with you." (Participant 2)

"I try first the items I sell to check its quality." (Participant 5)

"I create a group chat with probable customers and resellers. I upload pictures of items I sell in this platform." (Participant 1)

"I only get net payable from my customers. I only earn from commission." (Participant 7)

"I give discounts for bulk orders and repeat buyers." (Participant 8)

Many sellers often ignore the significance of looking at their business from the point of view of customers. It is very essential to preserve customer satisfaction and keep them delighted to become successful in a competitive environment (Ming & Yazdanifard, 2014). The need to meet the satisfaction towards online shopping is very crucial for a business to succeed online. Therefore, strategies and skills among online sellers need to be strengthened

for them to flourish and curl. Many marketers believe that customer value and satisfaction will lead to better performance of sales, customer loyalty, market share and profitability (Trattner & Kappe, 2013).

B. Defying Challenges on Online Selling amidst the Pandemic

Participants voiced out the different challenges they were facing on online selling amidst the pandemic. They had struggles from impatient and inconsiderate online buyers, and unpredictable stocks and prices to competitive market and unguaranteed quality of items. These were indicated and explored in the following themes:

Theme 1: Impatient and Inconsiderate Online Buyers

There are risks and disadvantages of online selling. One of these is the existence of online buyers who are impatient and inconsiderate. Various participants describe this struggle in their narratives.

“There are customers who do not like to wait, who do not know how to wait. At times, when the items arrived, the customer does not want to get the item.” (Participant 1)

“Because of restrictions during the pandemic, products or orders were not delivered on time. The quality of products was affected. Sometimes customers cancel orders because of this.” (Participant 4)

“During delivery, customers are not home. They do not leave payment of items to their household.” Participant 3

“Other customers keep on asking questions about the items, but in the end, they do not buy the items.” (Participant 5)

“Other customers keep changing minds.” (Participant 2)

In purchasing a product, Filipinos are known for being cautious. Aside from considering security, they also bear in mind the speed of transaction, convenience in mode of payment, price and values, return or exchange rules, website reputation, online reviews and feedback, good customer service, and low shipping charges (Fandialan, Milan & Alusen, 2019). In addition, customers expect that goods can be sent to wherever they are situated. They want

their orders consolidated, shipping bundled with service, and return items easily when not satisfied (KPMG International, 2017). This is the reason why online buyers tend to shift from being a good buyer to an impatient and inconsiderate one once their expectations are not met.

Theme 2: Suppliers' Unpredictable Stocks and Prices

At this time of pandemic, suppliers also faced a lot challenges in the market. Stocks become limited and prices become unpredictable. With this, online sellers also experienced similar struggles.

These are evident in their narratives.

Because there were limited stocks, items were fast moving. Supplier's stocks are quickly disposed." (Participant 5)

"Prices of same items were varied. I have to be critical in choosing the right supplier for the item: cheap but with good quality." (Participant 7)

When WHO officially announced COVID-19 as a pandemic, people responded by stocking up, bought medical supplies and household essentials. This brought both brick-and-mortar and online stores struggle to keep up with demand, and price gouging for supplies became rampant (Meyer, 2020). In addition, the social dimension and staying at home, has pushed consumers to head to online shopping. This affects the demand and uncertain supply chain issues for the e-commerce industry (Elrhim & Elsayed, 2020). Consequently, sellers are challenged about selling online since supply during the pandemic become unpredictable due to the growing demand from people, especially on essential goods and services.

Theme 3: Competitive Market

When online selling boomed, the market becomes more competitive especially that other platforms like Lazada and Shopee, and even Marketplace in Facebook that are offering a wider variety of products and services are available online. This scenario challenges every online seller to set out plans to deal with competitions in the market. Their narratives about this are presented below.

"Since the number of online sellers significantly increased, it is difficult to get customers." (Participant 1)

“As an online seller, I can say that the online selling market is now competitive. There are a lot of online sellers out there aside from the established marketplace like Shopee and Lazada.” (Participant 4)

“Many go to online shopping platforms since they can easily look into the products, as well as order online.” (Participant 3)

The narratives of participants can be associated to the claims of researches. Choi (2020) revealed that there is rapid development of e-commerce; thus, there is an increase in the number of goods and services sold mainly online rather than physical stores or flea markets. Marketers have founded a new era of purchasing behavior (Ming & Yazdanifard, 2014); that is consuming goods online. This movement becomes more popular and important during the outbreak of COVID-19 and leads to competitions in the market.

Theme 4: Quality of Items not Guaranteed

Since transactions with suppliers and customers are done mostly online, the quality of items sold is not perfectly guaranteed. There are times that suppliers offer products which are not on-hand. At times, online sellers sell products which they do not see perceptibly. Thus, online buyers tend to doubt the quality of products and items. These are narrated in the responses of participants.

“The quality of products or items cannot be guaranteed. Customers tend to bring back the item they bought due to its quality. Some items are broken. Some items do not meet the quality they expect in the beginning.” (Participant 4)

“The picture of items posted differ from the original items. This disappoints most customers and sellers.” (Participant 5)

In online selling, consumers cannot distinguish product quality based on the description and photos uploaded by sellers. With this, consumers will fully trust the information about product quality information (Shena, Xua & Yuan, 2020). Thus, online sellers faced a challenge about the veracity of the quality of items sold especially when they only transact with their suppliers online. Further, online shopping does not give customers the opportunity to touch and handle the goods and to see how it works. Customers cannot physically examine, try and test the items they are considering to buy (Gupta, Bansal & Bansal, 2013). Thus,

when items are delivered to them, there are instances that they bring back the item to sellers since they are not satisfied. Returns or faulty or damaged goods, exchanges can sometimes be difficult especially for online sellers who only have meager capital (Gupta, Bansal & Bansal, 2013).



Figure 2. Visual Illustration of the Various Experiences and Challenges on Online Selling

In this time of pandemic when there are restrictions on the movement of people, **online selling** is getting its essential plot in the marketing world. Though online selling that is done through a social media platform such as **Facebook** was seen to be advantageous since it could cater almost everything that people need, online sellers still find it **challenging**. Online selling becomes an opportunity for anyone involved to widen relationships with people as they gain **new friends** and acquaintances; though at times they need to deal with **inconsiderate online buyers or shoppers**. It has become a good source of **income** especially

for those who throw passion and **patience** about this endeavor though there may be limitations in **stocks** and **competition** in the market. **Lazada and Shopee**, other online e-commerce sites, are perceived to be competitors of small-time or part-time online sellers since these two offer a more variety of goods and services but sellers are tested to play their **skills** and **creativity** to thrive in the business. Selling online could also be a source of **fun**, an avenue to market and socialize. One's patience is also faced with every **HM** (how much?) of customers that need to be answered through a **PM (personal message)**.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Online selling is a concept and a practice that is gaining a foothold not only for non-workers but also to those who have regular income. Now that we are facing a pandemic which hinders a lot of people from going out to avail goods and services, online selling boomed as it offers convenience and ease to customers. However, even if it is advantageous to online buyers, online sellers are faced with various challenges as they do this sphere. Online sellers need to deal with impatient and inconsiderate buyers, unpredictable stocks and prices, competition in the market and unguaranteed quality of items. But despite of these challenges and struggles, online sellers describe online selling not only as a platform for marketing but a tool to gain new friends and widen their market horizons. It has also become a source of fun and income. Online selling also tests sellers to strategize and use their skills and creativity so they can be successful at it. Thus, online selling can have a decent place in the market as people prefer to do shopping online due to the pandemic.

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