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**COMPARING BROWSING BEHAVIOUR IN PHYSICAL
AND VIRTUAL STORES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

Browsing in this study is defined as “the in-store examination of a retailer’s merchandise for informational and/or recreational purposes without an immediate intent to buy.” This definition is similar to the one conceptualised and used by Bloch and Richins [2] and Bloch, Ridgway and Sherrell [3]. However, the term “in-store” in this study, refers to both physical as well as virtual stores.

The activity of browsing calls for the attention of researchers and marketers for several reasons. Browsers may make unplanned purchases due to in-store promotions or exposure to new products. The information gathered while browsing may facilitate future purchases. Furthermore, regular browsers may influence buying among others since they are often regarded as opinion leaders. Browsing, a prevalent activity and an important part of shopping behaviour, has received little research attention in the past.

The main objective of this study is to investigate and compare browsing and its antecedents in the context of both the physical store and the online or virtual store. As there is limited literature on browsing, we draw upon other research streams that provide insights into this behaviour such as external information search, exploratory behaviour and recreational shopping. Based on the literature review, in-depth interviews and results of a pilot study, a set of hypotheses is proposed. This paper explores the possible antecedents of browsing such as product involvement, general enjoyment of browsing, perceived risk, and the need for recreation and/or product information. The relationship between browsing and individual characteristics such as Optimal Stimulation Level, Curiosity and Need for Cognition, which has been largely associated with exploratory behaviour, will also be investigated. Beatty and Ferrell [1] found that in-store browsing is a strong predictor of urge to purchase

impulsively. It would thus be interesting to see if a similar phenomenon occurs during online browsing.

Hand phones serve as a context for our study, as an initial pre-test shows that it is the most frequently browsed product. A survey was posted on the Internet and a total of 248 surveys were completed, out of which 193 were identified as browsers and hence were included for the study. Respondents, who purchased a hand phone within the last two months or intend to purchase within the next month, are excluded from the analysis, as they would more likely be purchase oriented rather than browsing.

Results of correlation and regression analysis from our survey date survey show that the extent of browsing, or how much consumers browse, in physical and virtual stores, is explained by different antecedents. The antecedents that predict the extent of in-store browsing are affective product involvement, curiosity, recreation motive and the level of perceived risk. Recreational motive is a stronger predictor of the extent of in-store browsing compared to information motive. However, information motive is stronger than recreational motive for online browsing. On the Internet, consumers conduct more directed search as compared to in a store. The variables that predict the extent of online browsing are affective product involvement, enjoyment of online browsing, curiosity, the need to gather specific information, time available and perceived risk. Males are also found to enjoy online browsing more than females.

Browsing, regardless of whether it takes place in-store or online, is a curiosity-motivated behaviour. Finally, it is found that the desire to purchase as a result of in-store browsing is stronger as compared to online browsing. This finding is interesting as it suggests that

there is greater likelihood for impulse buying in a store rather than on the Internet.

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