E-commerce and online buying behavior: the rushed virtual consumers? A qualitative analysis of the Greek case

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TIME
SPACE
01 editorial

02 interview / Jan-Willem van der Mijde & Lisa Wiegel
Rob van Gerwen, The moral paradox of art

08 Article / Alice Breemen
Balancing on the boundaries: Kris Verdonck’s hybrid performances as a site of bodily experience

19 essay / Daan Roosgaarde
Liquid space 6.0

24 interview / Jan-Willem van der Mijde & Samuel Zwaan
Ro van Doesburg, Art as the affected spirit

30 Article / Panayiota Tsatsou
E-commerce and online buying behaviour; the rushed virtual consumer?

42 Article / Karin van Es
Screening public spaces: the paradox of the Urban Screens project

50 online article / Inga Schaub
52 column / Max Wiegel
E-commerce and online buying behaviour: the rushed virtual consumer?

Drawing upon an everyday life framework, this article examines the role of time parameters, such as time pressure and coordination problems, in internet users' perceptions and practices of e-commerce. The article reports on the findings obtained by in-depth interviews with internet users in Greece and concludes that time pressure and coordination problems are not the driving forces behind online purchases in Greece. The Greek consumers that were interviewed in this study construct alternative perceptions of time and hustle, while suggesting that e-commerce is not yet part of their consumption culture. Thus, the article's findings contest research that claims that people resort to e-commerce as a means of time alleviation. It also contributes to the issue of time and ICTs by addressing non-Western social systems in countries where new media penetration is less apparent than in North-Western European countries.

Broadcasting calendar, time-space compression and internet time are some of the terms used to describe the shifting relationship between ICTs and time. Castells argues that information and communication technologies have fundamentally changed social time and that the internet constitutes a "timeless-time." Hörnig et al. ask: "do technologies have time?...are they time-loaded?" and they examine the means by which temporalities in communication technologies relate to temporalities in social practices. Haddan argues that time is in many and controversial ways linked to ICTs, whilst Scannell argues that broadcast schedules are meaningful for structuring people's temporal settings of life. Also, the relationship between time and ICTs has been approached as 'disposable' time spent using ICTs and consequent 'time costs' as ICTs demand time that is often in deficiency. Temporal constraints on ICT use, time pressure that is potentially alleviated by ICT usage, and ICTs offering both opportunities and constraints on family’s 'time orientation' and 'clocking' are some other perspectives on ICTs and time.

E-commerce and time: time pressure vs. time alleviation

Everyday life is speeding up, bringing stress into people's lives and kuremo - a Japanese term that can be translated into "death from overwork." Robinson and Godfrey remark that although people have more free time than in the past, they feel 'more pressed for time', posing questions of time-personality and time-use schedule. On the other hand, there are

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1 Hörnig.
2 Castells defines e-commerce as "commercial activity conducted over electronic media such as over the internet." Berntsen defines "people" as a "new way of working and living together" which "has attracted special attention in recent years because of the rapid development of information and communication technologies." (Berntsen 1996: 112)
4 Caves, 1986.
9 Godfrey.
10 Berntsen.
11 Robinson and Godfrey. According to Scannell & Berntsen, the feeling of being rushed can take different shapes, where it is generated by different time-factors. But, Berntsen, Scannell & Godfrey stress the role of the individual's 'time personality' in the experience of time allusions.
studies that pose time scarcity under objective social conditions. Schor argues that one of the causes of time pressure is the additional working hours in today's consumer-oriented societies. From this point of view, Garhammer argues that industrial "flexibilization" results in increased time stress and Southerton argues that fragmented blocks of time lead to time disorganization and a constant effort for 'squeezing' limited blocks of time. Of particular interest for the core of this article, scholars maintain that time scarcity is related to consumers' activities. Kaufman-Schorber and Lindquist argue that this relation results in "further short-term strategies, such as consulting one's calendar, shopping at familiar stores, and the use of products that are thought to save time" (emphasis in original).

Research has shown that subjective perceptions of time can alter the patterns of use and adoption of ICTs, constructing different and often contradictory meanings about the necessity and utility of ICTs. Empirical studies have reported ambivalent results, as experienced shortage of time drives people to resort to ICTs as a means for saving time on the one hand, while viewing ICTs as technologies that do not offer a sufficient sense of flexibility, autonomy and control to the user on the other. Similar results were reported in the United States for telecommunications, whereas some studies have reached the conclusion that even technologies that are aimed at facilitating time-saving exacerbate temporal conditioning of people's daily life. The P-903 study found that the "opportunity costs" caused by ICT use intensify the sense of time pressure that users experience. In this sense, Haddon concluded that "time costs" shape the patterns of ICT use more than economic costs do, as users often feel like having limited 'free disposable time', with other commitments constraining ICT usage itself.

Such contradictions of the role of ICTS during time pressure and time alleviation constitute the conceptual framework of this article. However, questions about how ICTs can potentially both "ease as well as intensify time pressure" require a new understanding of people's settings of everyday life. Findings, such as Frissen's that ICTs are used as means for timesaving though not always perceived as problem-solvers, Haddon's that households are affected by the experienced shortage of time on their online buying behaviour and Southerton's that time-saving technologies can exacerbate the temporal conditioning of life require a different research approach. By examining a sample of Greek society, this article illustrates that it is important to consider people's consumption habits and the usage of ICTs in an everyday framework that is connected to the broader socio-cultural characteristics and legacies of the context in which people use ICT.

Why the Greek case? Internet, e-commerce & everyday life in Greece

Greece is a long-standing EU member state, with one of the highest national growth rates in the EU. On the other hand, Greece has one of the lowest rates of Internet and new technologies penetration in the EU, threatening the vision of a synchronized European information society. Low penetration rates of new technologies in Greece have reflected on internet diffusion rates since the first years of development of Internet networks in Europe. More recently, the Eurobarometer (EB) E-Communications Household 2008 survey found that 49% of households in the EU27 had Internet access in 2008, with Greece (22%) being the member state with the lowest Internet access rate and at the bottom of the EU27 together with Bulgaria (22%).

Regarding e-commerce, the Information Society Observatory (ISO) found that the main patterns of e-commerce in Greece have remained more or less the same in the years 2005-7, with the majority of people not making online purchases. More specifically, only 10% of internet users used the internet to purchase goods or services in 2007, with the majority buying non-fragile material goods (e.g. books, PC/electronic equipment) and only 1-3% purchasing online services (e.g. financial services, insurances, lottery) or food. In terms of concerns about online purchases, in the period 2005-7, only 7% of online buyers expressed concerns. These concerns were about delivery delays, wrong or problematic product deliveries and, to a lesser extent, about non-delivery.

In regard to the reasons why Greek people do not adopt the internet on a wide scale, recent quantitative and qualitative data has shown that people in Greece do not integrate the internet into their everyday lives, as they are subject to a culture of resistance to such technologies as well as to rather limited digital literacy. In the context of this article, the question examined concerns the role of time parameters, that constitute a critical element of everyday life and attract the interest of researchers in the field, because no such research has been conducted in Greece. Regarding e-commerce, the ISO survey found that those who do not make use of e-commerce in Greece do so because of concerns about safety and personal data, personal data confidentiality and preference of off-line shopping procedures.

This study consists of open-ended interviews with twelve middle-income and middle class individuals in Greece who have internet access at home. Although small scale free-style interviewing is not necessary to include representativeness, it was attempted to achieve a greater variety and spread of respondent characteristics. The variation of the sample - however small - promises to yield useful insights and to pose new questions for further research.

The interview topic guide was formed according to the research and conceptual framework of the study, but along the way this thematic framework was altered, modified and adjusted by the interview interactions. Two themes were examined in the interviews: first, patterns of online shopping; second, subjective constructions of 'haste' and the effects of e-commerce on the intensification or alleviation of time pressure.

Online shopping practices: security risks at the core

Six of the interviewees responded that they do not buy online, four have bought once or a few times in the past, and only two are or were regular online buyers. These using
e-commerce buy books, technological equipment and holiday packages, whereas a wide range of tangible goods, such as clothes, food and fragile objects, are excluded from online transactions.

Differences in online purchasing behaviour seem to be influenced by age, with those who are older being more conservative in their consumption habits. Also, geographic location and the social environment where the interviewees live influence their online buying behaviour. For instance, the two interviewees who used to buy online quite regularly, Z.C. (male, 24, single, postgraduate student) and A.O. (male, 30 years, single and unemployed), became familiar with e-commerce while living in the United Kingdom. A.O. ceased buying online regularly after his return to Greece and, although he does not specify the reasons for this change, his words imply the role of social environment in consumption practices:

"(...) the last five years in England I used to buy books, sportswear and plane tickets, because in that way I was able to buy easily, quickly and cheaply. Now I live in a small Greek town, in different circumstances and I don't have any reason to buy online."

Overall, the interview texts indicate that most interviewees have a negative attitude to and a fear of e-commerce, although they do not seem to be sufficiently informed about it:

- H.K. (female, 29 years, part-time employed, single): I don't deal with e-commerce at all. I'm afraid of it because I don't want any trouble... or anything else!
- Interviewer: What are you afraid of?
- H.K.: I'm afraid of “buy now” and things like that... I don't know exactly what... I'm afraid of being charged more.
- Interviewer: So, are you afraid of the financial part of online shopping?
- H.K.: I don't have a credit card, but I don't know if I would use it for online shopping, if I had one, because I think it's something... that you cannot control... there is the risk of being charged more.

This excerpt illustrates that interviewees who do not buy online point out security risks as the main reason: a risk that seems to worry those who are regular online buyers as well. For instance, Z.C. (male, 24, single, postgraduate student), a supporter of e-commerce, states: "Yes, of course! Security! This is why I buy online only from big companies. So far, I haven't had any problems, but I think security is an existing problem."

Most interviewees do not seem to be familiar with recently emerged consumption practices such as the usage of credit cards, which increases their reservations about buying online. It is worth citing the words of D.M. (male, 55 years, divorced with two children, full-time employed), as he is conservative in his consumption habits and has bought online only once, though through his work as a computer analyst he is familiar with new technologies:

"I'd never had a credit card. I pay in cash and I don't want to borrow money. The credit card is sort of a loan and it can make you buy without control, whereas you are always likely to be a victim of fraud, especially on the Internet, as fraud is so common and there's no way to eliminate it."

Apart from security reasons, the interviewees show hesitance about the quality of the products that are offered online, as the consumer who buys online can only have a picture and a description of the product or the service that is offered. M.M. (32 years, housewife, married, mother of two) claims in this respect: "(...) of course I prefer to go to a shop, to see the product and be sure about it." Furthermore, most interviewees regard e-commerce as involving more the purchase of tangible goods and less the acquisition of services. For instance, K.M. (27 years, single mother, full-time employed) stated at the beginning of the interview that she does not buy online. Only later on did she realize that she had once bought tickets for the Olympic Games online, but she did not consider that to be e-commerce.

**Online shopping and time: alleviation vs. intensification of time pressure**

Relating the above patterns of buying behaviour with time and the notion of hustle, the interview texts illustrated that buying practices are not directly connected to time and any experienced time pressure.

On the one hand, personal circumstances in everyday life, such as work and family commitments, seem to influence the interviewees' perceptions and experiences of hustle and time rush. For instance, interviewees who are employed and married or with children talk about time pressure and coordination problems, as opposed to those who are students, single or unemployed. K.M. (female, 27 years, single mother, full-time employed) indicated that for her childcare is the most time-consuming duty and that it brings about complete lack of personal time: "It's really difficult to find time for myself... Many times I'm forced to coordinate activities related to the child, the house and a number of other things. When an employed woman is a single mother, there's never enough time."

On the other hand, most interviewees attribute the issue of daily pressure to the way in which time is spent rather than how much time is available. Although they do not deny the occasional lack of time, the interviewees mostly mention the psychological pressure caused by the sense of waste of time, thus referring to the quality of time. The following excerpts indicate that structural and psychological factors put forth alternative conceptualizations of time, which seem to matter more than quantifications of time and any sense of rush per se:

- H.K. (female, 29 years, single, part-time employed): I don't experience time-pressure, I do have time. However, I'm not in the position to take advantage of time in the way I want to. It's clearly psychological.
- A.K. (male, 40 years, single, businessman): There's never enough time. You always need more.
- J.D. (male, 40 years, divorced, employed on an internet application): No, I can manage my daily schedule. I don't have problems with time. I would like, however, my job not to be so pressing. It's a matter of stress, not of time.
- J.K. (male, 40 years, married, unemployed): The routine can cause time-pressure, in the sense that dependency on daily habits can be a factor of pressure.

Hence, insufficient disposable time, lack of activities or empty time, as well as daily routine, can all cause stress and pressure, going beyond the conventional sense of rush and hustle. Looking at online shopping in relation to perceptions and experience of time pressure, only five interviewees consider e-commerce to be time-saving and the rapidity of transactions as one of its advantages. Also, such arguments are not tightly connected to
any experienced time pressure, as only one interviewee in this group of five, K.M. (female, 27 years, single mother, full-time employed), says to experience intense time pressure. The other four interviewees in the group express that they have plenty of free time and that they do not experience intense time pressure, while they argue that e-commerce constitutes an extension of the time-saving attributes of the internet, thus positively affecting the management of their daily schedules. For instance, H.K. (female, 29 years, single, part-time employed), a new internet user and not an online buyer, argues:

H.K.: Through using the internet I can find the information I need at any time, without restrictions, whilst I can easily and quickly manage my job applications and send my curriculum vitae.

Interviewer: Although you don’t use e-commerce, do you think it has anything to offer at all?

H.K.: If I hadn’t had the time to go shopping, I would have to buy online.

In this group of five, there are also those, such as J.D. (male, 40 years, divorced, employed in IT full-time), who stress the importance of skills in order for e-commerce to be used efficiently and to contribute to timesaving:

J.D.: (...) the internet can make people, mainly the youth, waste time, as young people easily lose control... it depends on the user and his or her skills: if one doesn’t know how to find what s(he) looks for online, he or she can spend more time than thought.

Interviewer: What about e-commerce?

J.D.: Its main advantage is that you can save time, as long as you know what you want to buy.

On the other hand, the majority of interviewees, seven, do not regard e-commerce as alleviating any experienced time pressure. Most consider that the effects of the internet on timesaving depend on the user’s skills and purposes of usage and view the relationship between e-commerce and time pressure with scepticism. Two of the interviewees express they face intense time pressure, but their tight daily schedules and limited time budget do not seem to have a bearing on their shopping practices:

D.M. (male, 55 years, divorced with two children, full-time employed): Time is something relative. If you’re not sure what you’re looking for, you may waste more time online than off-line. E-commerce doesn’t mean less time. The delivery of the product will take weeks, whereas in the case of off-line shopping you get the product immediately.

One of these seven interviewees, A.S. (female, 23 years, graduate), does not articulate any strong views about the impact of e-commerce on time-pressure. A.S. is the youngest interviewee and a rather exceptional case. Although she indicates to experience some time pressure, she questions whether the interview topic, namely the time-saving attributes of e-commerce are of any concern: “What can I say? I have no idea... I don’t feel that concerns me, honestly.”

Lastly, two interviewees in the group of seven emphasize how e-commerce can actually become time-consuming. J.K. (male, 40 years, married, unemployed), the heaviest internet user in the sample, considers the postal delivery of products time-consuming and also raises the role of location: “(...) many times I’ve received a product weeks later, with a long delay. Besides, I live in a small place where distances are not as long to make you spend much time on shopping.”

Time and traditional buying behaviour in Greece

The Greek interviewees who experience pressure of the pace of life do not seem to shop online regularly and issues such as fear traditional consumption habits and lack of knowledge prevent them from doing so. These consumers seem to remain loyal to their traditional consumption culture and are still far away from online shopping, confirming the latest quantitative data reported on e-commerce in Greece.13 Also, one can question the argument that people increasingly experience time pressure, as alternative narratives of hassle were articulated in the interview texts, indicating that personal experiences, daily schedules and particular lifestyles vary. Moreover, e-commerce does not seem to contribute (at least explicitly) in the construction of people’s narratives about pressing daily schedules and experienced time pressure, if any.

These findings entail implications for other literature in the field. They challenge findings such as Southerton’s study of women in the United Kingdom, Friesen’s case study of Dutch households and Haddon’s research of English middle-class households.14 Although these studies contextualize ICTs in an everyday framework, they present a rather limited and routine-grounded perspective of the everyday. The findings reported in this article put forth the role of parameters such as traditional consumption culture and suggest that everyday practices lie beyond daily routines and schedules, being related to broader socio-cultural and historical characteristics of the context in which people use ICTs.

Also, most of the existing research is concerned with western social systems and acknowledge the significant role of time in people’s online buying practices, whereas this article indicates that such conclusions may not be universally relevant and valid, varying from culture to culture. Therefore, I recommend that research on media habits and culture is conducted on the theoretical grounds of Hofstede’s study on the perception of time by various cultures.

Lastly, the interview texts presented in this article pose challenges for policy-makers and the ICT market. E-commerce has a long way to go in order for companies involved in online transactions to penetrate the Greek market and, in this regard, policies must be tailored to address the particularities of the Greek case. What is also anticipated is more qualitative and less homogeneous research which will articulate insightful, innovative and sceptical considerations for policy-making in the field.

About the author

Panayiota Tsatsou is a lecturer in Media and Communications at Swansea University, United Kingdom. She is currently completing her PhD thesis at the Landau School of Economics and Political Science. Her doctoral research explores digital divides in Greece and is supported by the Hellenic Republic State Scholarships Foundation.
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