How Can Secure Websites Improve Buying Intention? Usable Versus Non Usable Contexts?

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ABSTRACT

A conceptual model is proposed to show 3 effects of augmenting security perceptions (more pleasure, less perceived risk and higher trust) in order to improve buying intention. The role of usability in reinforcing these direct and indirect security effects has also been tested. This study examines the reinforcement of previous relationships in highly usable contexts. To test this, a fictitious website was designed for a nonexistent clothing company directed at the segment of middle class consumers. Two blocks of changes were made to alter website usability: one concerning website speed and the other related to ease of use. Results for a study sample of 170 respondents show that in usable contexts (that is, with quicker, functional websites), when website security perceptions augment, this leads to stronger effects (in terms of pleasure, trust and perceived risk) thereby simultaneously increasing buying intention.

Keywords: Buying Intention, e-Commerce, Experiment, Security, Textile Sector, Usability

INTRODUCTION

Identifying the factors involved in constructing successful transactional websites to stimulate buying intentions is a major concern. Previous literature classified online buying antecedents into three main blocks (Rodgers, Negash & Suk, 2005): (i) factors related to system characteristics (on-line engineering performance); (ii) factors related to content characteristics (the quality of website information), and (iii) factors related to service characteristics (dimensions offered by the end service such as tangibility, credibility, responsibility and empathy).

The present paper focuses on the first group of factors (related to system characteristics), based on the idea that if a website is easy to navigate/manage and well organised/sectioned, a consumer will try out the website, he or she will feel online satisfaction and, more importantly, he or she will buy (Kim, Eom & Ahn, 2005). Investing in website usability may be one observable signal used by firms to communicate their abilities and might stimulate users’ online purchase intentions (Agarwal & Venkatesh, 2002).

This paper examines two blocks of hypotheses. A first group of 8 hypotheses attempts to analyse the effects of website security perception (in terms of pleasure, trust and perceived risk) and their final impact on buying intention. Perceived risk effects, attitudinal effects

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and trust effects are also considered. A second group of 8 hypotheses analyse the moderating role of system variables (usability) in explaining previous relationships. In order to achieve this purpose, two different contexts for a same brand (a usable website and a non-usable one) were compared.

Both groups of hypotheses add value to previous literature, firstly, because we use website security as starting point in order to prove its direct and indirect effects on buying intention. Secondly, because, as it has been recently proven (Lee & Chen, 2011), usability is a powerful tool in order to improve buying intention. Then, we test how to motivate buying intention in two phases. Firstly, by improving security perceptions; secondly, and more interestingly, by manipulating web usability variables to reinforce previous security effects. This procedure based on experimentation through manipulating the usability variable is an interesting contribution from marketing, where most studies focus either on real websites or manipulate isolated variables such as security (Schlosser, White and Lloyd, 2006), amount of information provided (Park, Lennon & Stoel, 2005), or download time (Rose, Matthew & Curran, 2005); but not usability as a global concept.

The relevance of manipulating usability lies on the fact that usability makes users feel comfortable when surfing in the website, which increases the probability of a transaction being completed. This result was demonstrated in the Spanish context by Hernández, Jiménez and Martín (2009), who point out that speed (i.e. agile, easily and quickly accessible) is one of the main factors that must be taken into account when designing a commercial website, together with its ease of usage (i.e. clarity, simplicity, consistency, easily understandable and well organized websites).

The study focuses on the textile sector (a highly fragmented industry in Spain composed of hundreds of small firms). An invented clothing firm was created (“Resaka”) and two different websites were developed in order to analyse the impact of two different usability contexts on buying intentions. Website usability is a critical metric for assessing the quality of a firm’s web presence (Agarwal & Venkatesh, 2002). As both authors indicate, “the critical challenge facing businesses today, then, is to develop a web presence that is not only compelling for the visitor, but is able to serve its instrumental goals as well” (p.168). The hypothesis in the second part of our research is that usability moderates the proposed relationships. The prediction is that the 8 relationships (including security, trust, pleasure, perceived risk and buying intention) will be stronger in highly usable contexts.

The theoretical framework section explains theoretical benchmarking and provides some insights into website designing variables and their influences on risk perceptions, pleasure attitudes, trust and buying intention. Methodology section explains the source of data, the experiment preparation and the variables measured. Results sections present the results of the analysis. Finally, the main conclusions, including the managerial implications and the limitations of the paper are summarized in last two sections of the paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Importance of Website Security

Website security is defined as perceived safety towards the provider (Rodgers, Negash & Suk, 2005). Perceived safety occurs when consumers believe that their personal information will not be viewed, stored or manipulated during transit or storage by inappropriate parties, in a manner consistent with their confident expectations. This definition captures a personal anticipation (Chellappa & Pavlou, 2002). Perceived security is operationalized considering three main aspects that a website should provide to stimulate online buying (Tsai & Yeh, 2010): (i) sufficient information on security, (ii) authorization mechanisms and (iii) protection protocols of private information.

Several studies have focused on how to achieve secure websites by adopting these kinds
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