ABSTRACT

Webmasters aim increasingly at encouraging visitors’ immersion in the heart of an online experience. In order to better understand this phenomenon, a qualitative and a quantitative study are presented here that analyze the influence of immersive experiences on the online perceived value of the visit and on the potential responses of the visitor towards the site, the brand and the product. The author’s study shows that virtual reality web sites generate episodes of immersion, which have an impact on the hedonic and utilitarian value of the visit experience. The author also shows that perceived value plays the role of mediator between the immersion and visitors’ behavior and the author highlights the moderating effect of involvement and expertise on the relationship between immersion and perceived value. Finally, from theoretical and managerial points of view, our results offer perspectives on the perceived benefits of online immersive experiences.

Keywords: Experience, Expertise, Immersion, Internet, Involvement, Perceived Value

INTRODUCTION

One of the key features of e-commerce Web sites is that they encourage visitors to live a unique, extraordinary, and differentiated experience. These days, the number of Internet users worldwide has surpassed two billion, and it includes nearly one third of the world’s population. Therefore, brand managers in e-commerce try to provoke the immersion of visitors at the heart of a captivating and intense experience (Schmitt & Rogers, 2008). The virtual outlets are now designed in order to make the online consumer live a new experience on the net, both subjectively and objectively. These practices seek to seduce visitors by dressing merchant environments, through the thematization and the staging of Web sites (Firat, Fstagi, & Ulusoy, 2009), by using techniques of virtual reality. The stimulation of emotional and affective reactions of Internet users leads to their immersion in online contexts that are restricted and themed. The immersion brings visitors to a different environment, in which they are fully engaged and where they assess both the tangible and intangible benefits of their online experience.

A race for creativity and innovation is taking place between the different competitors in e-commerce. The aim is to offer experiences in immersive environments to the consumer in search of meanings, significations, and gratifications (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). These environments are represented by the brands to enable clients to have an enjoyable escape rather than simply meet products or services (Carù & Cova, 2006).

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Our study aims at validating the concept of online immersion. In particular, we analyze the effect of immersion on the perceived value and behavior of Internet users (purchase intention, word of mouth, and intention to revisit the site), and we study the effect of perceived value on the behavior of Internet users. The reactions of users are supposed to be neither all alike nor positive but also depending on individual skills. The expertise of the Internet and the involvement in the respective product category seem to play important roles in the relationship between immersion and perceived value relationship. Thus, we consider these variables as moderators in our model.

Our study focuses on immersion in experiential environments of commercial Web sites, thereby contributing to the general research approach in experiential marketing. We extend existing research that has been conducted in contexts such as leisure and culture (e.g., Joy & Sherry, 2003; Fornerino, Helme-Guizon & Gotteland, 2008) through the context of e-commerce. Our findings are helpful to managers by providing innovative solutions in the context of e-commerce.

This article is organized as follows. In the next section, we review the literature on the concept of immersive experience before we present the study design and the results. In the conclusion, we set out theoretical and managerial contributions of our study and discuss avenues for future research.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In recent years, the consumption experience has become an essential concept in thinking about consumer behavior (Carù & Cova, 2003). This concept includes tangible and intangible benefits to individuals who are in search of differentiation, originality, and hedonism (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Consumption from the experiential perspective is characterized by a personal, subjective, and emotionally charged living (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), where symbolic exchanges occur between the individual, the product/service, or the place of consumption. It assumes an imaginary activity of the consumer, remoteness from reality, and a feeling of escape (Firat, Dholakia & Venkatech, 1995; Venkatesh et al., 2010). Contemporary consumption involves an imaginary activity of the consumer, distancing him or her from reality, and an intense feeling of escape (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). In particular, products are not consumed just because of their functional characteristics but also because they have meanings and symbolize the consumer’s associations and perceptions about their subjectivity (Goodman & Cohen, 2004; Ferreira, Botelho & Almeida, 2008). It takes the form of a set of immersions in experiential moments created from enchanted, spectacular, and multi-faceted encounters (Firat & Dholakia, 1998; Carù & Cova, 2003) within the contexts in which consumers can live an unforgettable brand experience. The professionals of marketing assist consumers in producing their own experiences (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009). They dramatize the scene, script the story told by the brand, and stimulate the actions and interactions between consumers and their environments. The combination of these three modes of action results in consumers living experiences of consumption.

Immersion is defined as a “state of intense activity in which the consumer is, when he reach completely to the experience” (Fornerino, Helme-Guizon, & Gotteland, 2008); it translates the level of commitment and is manifested by the degree to which the individual is unaware of any solicitation other than the activity itself. Immersion is related to curiosity and escapism (Hoffman & Novak, 2009). Therefore, the person is fully absorbed by the activity (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). However, immersion is both a state and a process; it is not instantaneous and it consists of a set of operations that the individual performs in to appropriate the experience (e.g., exploration and marking). To gain access to the immersion, the consumer brings into play their individual skills (Fornerino,
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