Chapter 10

Virtual Atmosphere, Emotions, Attitudes and Real Use: When “Love is in the Air” in a Virtual Community

António C. Moreira  
University of Aveiro, Portugal

Mariana Mira Ferreira  
University of Aveiro, Portugal

Pedro Macedo  
University of Aveiro, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This study involves several theories, namely: the theory of reasoned action, the technology acceptance model, the theory of planned behavior and the internet banking acceptance model. It aims to understand the relationships between the virtual atmosphere and emotional states, how the individual characteristics (social identity, altruism and telepresence) and emotional states influence attitudes, and how attitudes, past experience and trust influence actual use of a site. To this end, the authors developed three conceptual models explaining the relationships among the above-mentioned variables. Methodologically, descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis and the generalized maximum entropy estimator are used to test the three models in a wedding site. Of the eight hypotheses proposed, one can only partially validate hypotheses h1, h2, h3 and h6, while hypothesis h7 is accepted and the remaining are rejected.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer behavior is influenced by many factors. Individuals need to know in advance how their behavior influences and is influenced by others (Gefen & Straub, 2004; Gefen, 2000). However, as consumer behavior is difficult to control, the use of methods that could help understand consumer behavior has become essential to understand the individual’s needs (Gefen, 2000).

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The influence of the environment on consumer behavior has been studied by psychologists. Even before traders consider this important area of study, landscapers, architects and interior decorators had already recognized consumer behavior as relevant (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982).

The world is constantly and rapidly changing, technology being currently one of its main engines. Digital technologies have contributed to consumer behavior modification constantly presenting new forms of marketing of goods and services (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2006).

Since the mid-1980s, with strong growth in the 1990s, several studies have allowed the construction of models that attempt to predict what behaviors might be associated with the acceptance of the technology. The continuous increase of such studies is justified by the significant growth in the presence of technology in our daily lives. Currently, it is relatively easy for any of us to access a computer, tablet or smartphone with internet access, and is increasingly simple and familiar to use them to make online purchases. However, to know how and why individuals use certain sites, especially those linked with very high involvement as is the case of wedding-related sites, are understudied and there is a lack of general knowledge about how users behave.

This research aggregates concepts associated with consumer behavior and environment, consumer emotions, consumer attitudes and actual use of an online service related to weddings. Moreover, one of the main contributions of this chapter is related to the evaluation of these variables in a virtual community. Another contribution is that this is the first study of its kind analyzing a virtual community using the generalized maximum entropy (GME) estimator, which is robust when using small samples sizes (micronumerosity).

This study has important contributions for several areas, namely for public relations, brand image and social media: firstly, it uses unique characteristics as virtual atmosphere, emotions and attitudes in a high-involvement virtual community; and secondly, it uses a robust estimation method when small samples are at stake, the GME.

For a better understanding of the relationships between consumer behavior and environment, consumer emotions, consumer attitudes and actual use of an online service, this study has the following main objectives:

- To understand what components of the virtual atmosphere have more influence on pleasure/arousal, as emotional states;
- To realize if individual characteristics (social identity, altruism and telepresence) and emotional states influence attitudes;
- To understand whether attitudes, past experience and trust influence the wedding site actual use;

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Solomon (2002, p. 24) defines consumer behavior as the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, buy, use or have products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and wants. Consumer behavior is seen as a continuous process of exchange where there is a transaction between two or more people who give and receive something of value (Solomon, 2002). Although the moment of exchange is an important part of consumer behavior, there is an increasingly tendency to include in this process the issues that influence the consumer before, during and after his/her purchase.
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