Chapter XIX

Affording Cultural and Social Presence in E-Marketing

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the relationships among several concepts important to Web design, marketing communications and consumer behavior. Originally from psychology literature, the concept of affordances, the result of interaction between a human and an object, has emerged in product design literature. This chapter extends the concept to design of mediated environments, stressing detailed social and cultural contextual elements and potential behaviors. Vividness and interactivity in mediated environments are requisite qualities for inducing a sense of presence, consumers’ perception on some level that a mediated environment is non-mediated. Well-designed mediated environments afford consumers online opportunities to modify relationships with their environments.

Introduction

Much literature on the topic of e-marketing and virtual reality concerns the concepts of interactivity, vividness, involvement and presence. According to the literature, these and other concepts are important to success in e-marketing. However, the literature has...
not adequately addressed what some scholars see as a shortcoming of the research in traditional marketing communication media: researchers have not paid enough attention to the social and cultural contexts of consumption and marketing communication. As e-marketing becomes more competitive, understanding context may be the difference between success and failure.

Ritson and Elliott (1999) pointed out that advertising research tends to employ methodology specifically designed to eliminate social context as a variable. Then, using ethnographic methods, they demonstrated how consumers use advertising in socially oriented rather than purchase-oriented activities. That finding should hardly surprise those who recognize that consumption itself is a socially oriented rather than purchase-oriented activity. One would expect the communication surrounding the activity to reflect the nature of the activity.

Much e-marketing research adapts methodologies used in traditional marketing communication research. The adapted methodologies, because of their designs, remove social and cultural contexts as variables. Studies of 3-D product demonstrations (Daugherty, Li & Biocca, 2001; Li, Daugherty & Biocca, 2002), for example, examine product attributes and functional consequences using methods that prohibit subjects from interacting with each other. The use context of products is largely ignored even though that context, social and cultural, may give the product its real meaning and, therefore, its social value. In other words, like much traditional marketing communication, e-marketing and virtual reality research often fails to consider product concept.

This chapter discusses social and cultural context in e-marketing and virtual reality. The research concepts of presence, along with its antecedents vividness and interactivity, are critical to creating social and cultural context in virtual reality. The concept of affordance is the foundation of context since the value of any social or cultural context resides in what that context affords participants.

**Affordance**

Research in e-marketing and virtual reality introduces the concept of affordance from product design literature. However, some researchers may misinterpret affordances as only perceived product cues. Li, Daugherty and Biocca (2003, 2002), for example, define product affordances as sets of rules or perceptual cues that “guide consumers interacting with products during prepurchase inspection” (2003, p. 397; 2002, p. 50). Although that definition is not entirely incorrect, it offers a narrow view of affordances. In fact, Li et al. (2003) also noted that affordances are what an object offers or what humans think an object offers. Perceptual cues, therefore, are not themselves affordances. However, perceptual cues as objects have affordances, i.e., what the cues offer or what humans think the cues offer.

According to Gibson (1966), information from perceptual systems specifies value, enabling individuals to “detect the values of things at a distance and move toward or away from them in accordance with what they afford” (p. 73). Norman (1998), from whose
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