Chapter 16

Culture-Sensitive Virtual E-Commerce Design with Reference to Female Consumers in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

Virtual E-Commerce can deliver product information that is similar to the information obtained from direct product examination. Both, interactivity and customer involvement can enhance the entertainment value of the online shopping experience. However, if virtual E-Commerce aims to become a truly global platform for collaboration, then it is vital to keep in mind that consumers’ behaviour is bound by their cultures. This chapter study the factors that demonstrate the positive effect of designers on people’s lives; virtual E-Commerce can contribute to world peace, economic growth is driven by female consumers, and Saudi female e-consumers reluctance to adopt E-Commerce compared to Saudi male e-consumers in spite of the facts that they are both the most financial and shopping savvy in the world. This chapter provides a semiotic diagnosis of the six socio-cultural dimensions that should be considered in the design of virtual E-Commerce targeting the Saudi Arabian female market.

INTRODUCTION

Electronic commerce (E-Commerce) has attracted an increasing research activities in recent years, different perspectives of E-Commerce have been examined to effectively utilize this online retailing for commercial purposes (Sait, Al-Tawil, & Hussien, 2004) (Jamal & Ahmed, 2007). Some researchers argue that the development of E-Commerce has been constrained by the inability of online consumers to feel, touch, and sample products through web-interfaces, as they are able to do in traditional shopping store (Jiang & Benbasat, 2004). Virtual E-Commerce can deliver product information that is similar to the informa-
tion obtained from direct product examination. In addition, the interactivity and customer involvement created by virtual E-Commerce can enhance the entertainment value of the online shopping experience (Kim & Forsythe, 2008).

Although virtual E-Commerce phenomenon is growing rapidly; it is primarily based on western knowledge, traditions, backgrounds, culturally bound ontologies and epistemologies. There is little if any attention paid to other cultures (Mohd Yusof & Zakaria, 2007). However, consumers’ behaviour is bound by their cultures (Hofstede G., 1998). Cultural issues can affect all aspects of product design and localisation. For example, local currencies, accounting preferences, and formats of local addresses, contact details such as names and phone numbers needs to be appropriate to the target market (Lommel & Ray, 2007). Cultural factors can play a significant role in accepting and rejecting a product by a specific market. It can make the difference between a product that works and is successful in a market, versus one that is frustrating for or even rejected by customers.

One possibility is particularly enticing is the potential of virtual worlds to contribute to world peace. A propensity to engage in trade appears to be a human universal, a social instinct evolved in part to reduce the chances of violent conflict among the trading parties. From an international trade perspective, this can lead to two main benefits: a reduction in the likelihood that individuals from different nations will be willing engage one another in violent conflict; and possibly, better and cheaper products and services (Kock, 2008).

It is important for business owners, market researchers, web designers, human factors specialists to be aware that marketing to women is currently the most effective business growth strategy. Women are the most financially attractive target audience and therefore marketing to them will accelerate higher shareholder value (Roberts & Cunningham, 2008; Ellwood & Shekar, 2008). It is necessary to acknowledge that women are the real boss when it comes to buying; starting from buying the weekly grocery shopping to buying cars, furniture, and even more. Also we need to understand that women are different from men in many psychological and behavioural ways that affect their relationship with brands (Ellwood & Shekar, 2008).

In spite that Saudi Arabia is becoming the largest retail market in the Arabian peninsula (Sohail, 2008) and it is an emerging market for the majority of the global retailers (Thomas, 2008), E-Commerce, as a concept, is not very clear in the minds of the respondents. For them, it is a next generation phenomenon, not even one-fifth of the people have ever tried visiting E-Commerce website or bought anything online. Their reasons for not adopting online shopping were: the complexity of online shopping process as in viewing products, selecting desired items, placing orders, and making payments. Also some respondents are not keen to use credit cards to make online payments (for religious reasons). Others consider it unsafe to buy on the internet and give out their personal information. Besides, majority think there might be concerns regarding the after sales services if they buy goods online (Commision, 2008). Moreover, there is a perceptible significant difference between the numbers of males and females with positive responses towards adopting E-Commerce. Studies to investigate the factors that act as obstacles to Saudi female consumers’ adoption of E-Commerce have not been carried out yet (Sait, Al-Tawil, & Hussien, 2004) (Sait S., Al-Tawil, Sanaullah, & Faheemuddin, 2007) (Rambo, Liu, & Nakata, 2009).

Various approaches exist to enable researchers to understand the way people from different cultures perceive, understand, and respond to IT applications. Semiotics is a discipline that makes sense of the hidden messages produced by a culture (Nadin & Zakia, Creating Effective Advertising Using Semiotics, 1994). In other words, semiotics identifies the way an individual interpreter of a sign understands that sign. In principle, the interpreter integrates his/her background knowledge in the