Chapter 8

Web Experience Effects in a Virtual Shopping Interaction Environment

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this chapter is to contextualize the concepts of web atmospherics and web experience in the particular case of a shopping situation in the Internet environment. Based on a broader concept of user experience, the chapter identifies the main influencers of consumer behaviour in the Internet environment assessing the role and degree of importance of usability, trust and other web experience dimensions on consumer decision-making processes and responses. The chapter presents the results of a research project comparing the influence of the web experience on consumer behaviour in different cultural environments; the study analyses the role of cultural differences on the online shopping behaviour of consumers from two different European countries. The study identifies several similarities and a few differences in the way web experience factors affect the decision making process and the choice of an online vendor by customers with different cultural backgrounds. The findings provide evidence of behavioural homogenization between consumers of different ethnic origin in the new global virtual marketplace.

INTRODUCTION: MARKETING AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

Almost twenty years after its commercial launch the Internet has become a mainstream shopping and consumption environment for many people worldwide. According to a 2009 Nielsen Online report, Internet shopping has already been adopted by more than 95% of the Internet users in some countries; 40% of the Internet users are regular online shoppers and more than 80% of them had done at least once an online purchase by the end of 2007. The Internet is no longer a channel where businesses disseminates their product information but a place where interactions between businesses
and consumers and consumers and consumers take place. In other words, the Internet as strategic commercial tool and marketing channel is becoming ever important (Deighton & Konrfield, 2009) and businesses are under pressure to professionalise their online activities. Hence the challenge facing businesses and Internet marketers are: how to create a unique and competitive online business proposition and how to communicate this to the online customers.

The online customer experience (or Web Experience) from visiting a commercial web site is an important parameter in the process of online customer persuasion and acquisition. The aim of our research is to identify and empirically measure the importance of Web Experience factors as influencing parameters of online customer behaviour. The research questions that this chapter intends to addresses are the followings:

1. How the Web Experience parameters (i.e. Usability, Interactivity, Trust, Aesthetics and Marketing Mix) affect on the online decision-making process of consumers?
2. What is the relative importance of these parameters on the consumer’s choice processes?
3. Do cultural and ethnic differences have any effect on the way Web Experience elements affect the choice process?

To achieve the aim we conducted an experiment in order to assess the way the various Web Experience elements (Constantinides, 2004) influence the online decision making process. The data obtained allowed us to compare these elements and measure the relative importance. The data collection was carried out in two different countries in order for us to compare the influence of these factors on consumer online behaviours in different cultural settings. The reason for doing this was that despite the extensive research findings on online shopping very limited research attention has been given to the global dimension of online marketing and very limited information is known about the effects of culture on online shopping. If we want to explain the nature and implications of the Internet on consumer behaviour it is necessary to identify and explore the dimensions that characterize the Internet shopping environment to understand the way individuals are influenced by online stimuli and to identify the experiences and feelings of consumers during the online decision processes not only in ethnically and culturally homogenous but also heterogeneous settings.

The organisation of the chapter is the following: In section 3 we discuss the theoretical contributions on consumer decision making process and in particular the online ones. In that respect we explain the term Web Experience and its components based also on previous research findings. In the same section we discuss views and findings on intercultural consumer behaviour; this is by most researchers as diverse and influenced by cultural differences (Hofstede, 1980). In section 4 we discuss the methodology of the survey and present the basic descriptive statistics of the sample populations. In section 5 we present the results and discuss the findings in relation to the research questions. In section 6 the main conclusions and practical implications of the study are discussed while in section 7 we discuss the main research limitations and identify the future research agenda.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Online Customer Experience**

Conventional frameworks of decision making, focusing on consumer decisions and choices, could be the starting point for studying online consumer behaviours. Mehrabian and Rusell (1974), for example, suggest the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) approach where external stimuli are processed and modulated by the organism (i.e. personal traits) and generate a response, either cognitive, affective or behav-