



A proposed model of online consumer behavior: Assessing the role of gender

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the influence of Internet experience and web atmospherics on consumer online behavior. It developed a model of web navigation behavior where these antecedent variables drove website exploratory behavior and website involvement, which in turn, drove site attitudes and pre-purchase evaluations. These relationships were tested and confirmed in the context of a pharmaceutical website. Further, men and women differed in web navigation behavior, with men engaging in less exploratory behavior and developing less website involvement than women. However, across the two sexes, entertainment, challenge, and effectiveness of information content were the key drivers of website attitudes. The findings provide several guidelines for online communication strategy.

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1. Introduction

The Internet is becoming an important facet of communication strategy due to its ability to deliver information, entertainment, and e-shopping. Internet access and usage have been steadily increasing in the United States with a corresponding increase in online information gathering and shopping. While men were considered early adopters of Internet shopping (Asch, 2001), recent data suggested that both men and women equally embraced this medium – 82% of men and 75% of women undertook online search for goods/services in 2005 (Pew Internet and American Life Project Survey, 2005).

Despite the growing importance of the Internet and its adoption by both sexes, research examining the factors that influence online browsing and consumer response toward online information is sparse. Also, little research investigated gender differences in online browsing. Specifically, although extant research studied gender differences in web advertising perceptions (Schlosser et al., 1999), use patterns (Weiser, 2000), and online privacy concerns (Sheehan, 1999), it did not directly examine how Internet experience and web atmospherics influenced the web navigation behavior of men and women. Hence, this research investigated the impact of Internet experience and web atmospherics on online browsing and if the influence of these factors varied by gender.

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2. Conceptual background

The Internet is emerging as the main source of information for many products due to its ease of use, wide access, and wealth of information. The literature suggests that external information search could be goal-directed pre-purchase search and interest-driven search (Bloch et al., 1986). While research focused on pre-purchase search aimed at reducing uncertainty and risk, some researchers investigated ongoing search based on hedonic recreation (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) and enduring involvement with a good or service (Bloch et al., 1986). Within the Internet medium, external information search was broken down into web navigating behaviors: searching, browsing, finding, selecting, comparing and evaluating information as well as interacting and transacting with the website. To account for these, the proposed model of web navigation behavior included four major variables (Internet experience, web atmospherics, online behavior, and outcomes) and their interrelationships: Internet experience is conceptualized as the consumer's skills and challenge in using the Internet. Web atmospherics are related to the functional and hedonic characteristics of a website (i.e., structure, effectiveness, informativeness, and entertainment). Online behavior encompasses exploratory behavior and website involvement. Outcomes include site attitudes and pre-purchase evaluations. The conceptual model is depicted in Fig. 1 and explained below.

2.1. Internet experience

Flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) provided insights for the online information search experience (Internet experience). Flow is

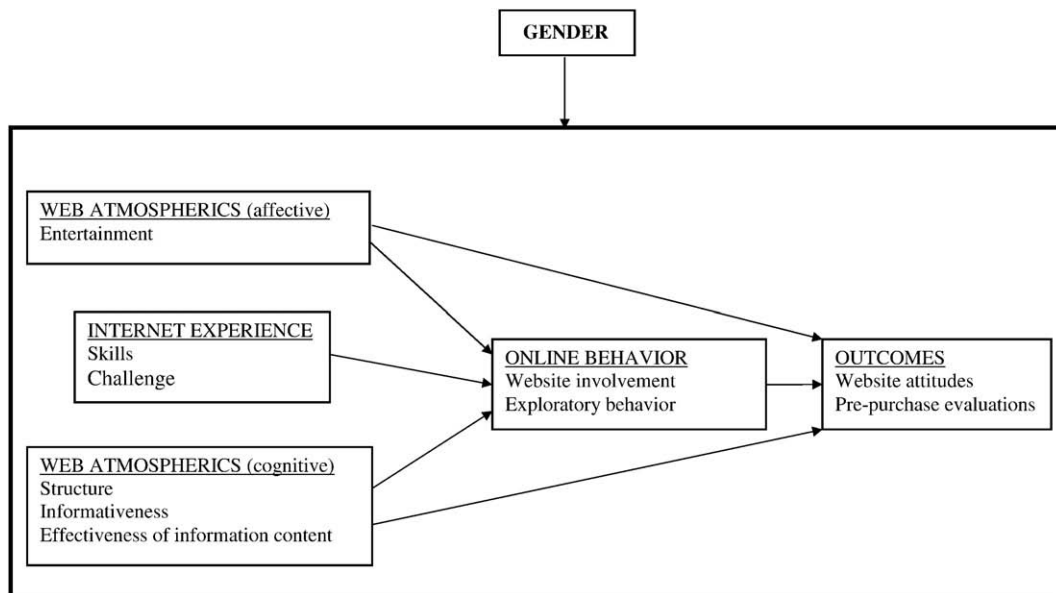


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of online consumer behavior.

an intrinsically motivated optimal state which occurs when challenge and skills are in balance and elevated beyond the critical threshold. When challenge encountered during task performance was matched to consumers' ability, they felt more active, alert, satisfied, pleased, and creative, whereas when such an optimal combination was absent the experience deteriorated (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre, 1989). In the online context, researchers reported findings consistent with this view. For example, researchers found that both challenge and skills were essential for creating positive online search experience (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004; Novak et al., 2000). Ghani and Deshpande (1994) reported that the level of perceived skills and challenge in human–computer interactions was associated with achieving the flow state, which in turn predicted behavior. Luna et al. (2002) found that a website that offered optimal challenge (relative to skills) resulted in a more positive attitude toward the website. Also, skills and confidence in navigating websites were found to be antecedents of positive attitudes toward internet shopping (Childers et al., 2001). Thus, people skilled at using the web and finding it challenging experienced flow, searched for information online and responded favorably to such information. Thus:

H1. There is a positive relationship between (a) skills and exploratory behavior; (b) challenge and exploratory behavior; (c) challenge and attitude toward the website; (d) challenge and pre-purchase evaluations.

2.2. Web atmospherics

Web atmospherics relate to the conscious development of website environment to induce a positive response. These are critical to the effectiveness of a site since they determine online browsing and purchase behavior. The literature identified four variables as web atmospherics: structure, effectiveness of its content, informativeness, and entertainment (Bell and Tang, 1998; Chen and Wells, 1999; Richard, 2005).

2.2.1. Structure

Store layouts and signage which improve consumer's wayfinding are important to the success of brick-and-mortar retailers. This is even more relevant within the Internet medium where it is easy and

relatively costless to leave a site and move to a competitive site. In online contexts, layout corresponds to website structure. Huizingh (2000) listed four navigational structures: a tree, a tree with a return-to-home page button, a tree with horizontal links, and an extensive network. Most websites (over 60%) had a simple structure of either a tree or a tree with a back to home page button, which allowed consumers to surf and access information easily (Poruban, 2002). Easy access to information can facilitate consumer goal achievement. The easier it was to learn and use navigational cues, the more cognitive capacity was available to process information in websites, resulting in better memory and superior attitudes. Consistent with this view, efficient websites induced positive attitudes toward websites (Elliott and Speck, 2005; Griffith, 2005). Thus:

H2. Effective website structure leads to positive website attitudes.

2.2.2. Effectiveness of information content

It refers to currency of the information content of a website, and is akin to executional cognitive elements in MacKenzie and Lutz's (1989) framework. For Johnson and Mistic (1999), both currency and presentation were critical, and consumers evaluated websites on both dimensions. Currency is critical in online contexts since the Internet is more interactive and the preferred source of information for consumers. Hence, consumers likely have higher levels of exploratory behavior and site involvement if the website has current information related to the topic. Thus:

H3. There is a positive relationship between effectiveness of information content and (a) exploratory behavior; (b) website involvement.

2.2.3. Informativeness

It reflects the amount and richness of the information contained in the website, includes information about firms, products, non-commercial information, and transaction details such as payment options and shipping. With advances in technology, better search engines browsers, and faster downloading, websites are becoming more advanced, and have the capacity to encompass a lot of information along these dimensions (Huizingh, 2000). As informativeness increased, we assumed that consumers needed to engage in

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