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Interface design and emotions experienced on B2C Web sites: Empirical testing of a research model

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of four Web site interface features on the cognitive process that trigger online shoppers' emotions, operationalized as mental states of readiness that arise from appraisal of events and considered as direct antecedents to approach or avoidance behaviors. A research model was tested with data collected from 215 Web shopping episodes for low-touch merchandise. Results show that shoppers experienced all six emotions posited in the model. The emotions of liking and joy were experienced intensively by a substantial number of shoppers. The results also demonstrate that interface features – key components of the usability of a Web site – influenced the three cognitive appraisals illustrated in the research model. Moreover, the cognitive appraisals of situational state and control potential impacted the six emotions examined. This paper also highlights several theoretical contributions and managerial implications that should help managers and Web site managers improve the interface design of their Web sites in order to facilitate information gathering and better support online shopping processes.

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1. Introduction

In today's Internet economy, few would dispute that a well-designed Business-to-Consumer (B2C) Web site can be a strategic competitive tool for e-retailers selling both low-touch items – standard goods such as books, CDs, and concert tickets and high-touch items – goods consumers prefer to see and touch before purchase (The Economist, 2000). Indeed, a good design can increase Web site success and enhance several consumer dimensions, including information gathering, intention to return to the Web site, trust, and performance improvement (Kumar, Smith, & Bannerjee, 2004; Nielsen, 2000; Palmer, 2002; Wang & Emurian, 2005; Zhang & von Dran, 2000). On the other hand, a poorly designed Web site can negatively affect the online vendor's corporate image and revenues and possibly lead to site failure (Buschke, 1997; Liu, Tucker, Koh, & Kappelman, 2003; Rayport & Jaworski, 2004; Zona Research, 2001).

B2C Web sites are becoming more and more complex since the number of functionalities offered to consumers is constantly increasing in order to improve both the information-gathering process and the overall online shopping experience. For example, to support the shoppers' decision process, Amazon.com offers more than 40 functionalities, including customized Web pages, one-click purchase product previews, auctions and mobile access.

With these recent developments, Web site managers and developers are now overwhelmed with recommendations on how to design effective Web sites. A search for books on the subject of "Web design" on the book retailer Barnes & Noble's Web site yields more than 5000 results. Articles on the subject in trade and scientific journals are also abundant. However, two major shortcomings stand out. First, the proposed sets of guidelines are frequently contradictory and few are based on theoretical foundations (Geissler, Zinkhan, & Watson, 2001; Kim, Lee, Han, & Lee, 2002; Liu & Arnett, 2000; Song & Zahedi, 2001; Zhang & von Dran, 2000). Second, Web site design recommendations for designers and managers often ignore one key determinant of consumer behavior: their affective dispositions. Checklists and guidelines, even those that are user- or consumer-oriented, do not prioritize the feelings or emotions that can arise during online shopping episodes despite important empirical findings regarding the crucial impact of shoppers' affective states on their behaviors in both traditional and online environments (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Kalbach, 2006; Turley & Milliman, 2000).

This study attempts to address these gaps in the literature as it focuses on emotions and proposes and tests a conceptual model derived from empirical studies on information systems use, consumer behavior and psychology. Specifically, within the traditional Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm, this exploratory interdisciplinary research examines the relationships between several Web site interface features (stimulus) and consumers' cognitive processes leading to the emotions elicited during online shopping episodes (organism) for low-touch goods. The relationships between the consumers' cognitive processes (organism) and their online behaviors (response) are not within the scope of this study since several researchers in the field of marketing have already demonstrated that affective states such as pleasure and arousal felt during traditional and online shopping episodes for low-touch goods affect consumption behaviors (see the following section presenting the theoretical background).

The hypotheses presented and tested seek to provide answers to the following research questions: (1) Do consumers experience emotions – defined as mental states of readiness arising from appraisals of events – when shopping on the Web? (2) Can the cognitive perspective of emotions – identifying cognitive appraisals as antecedents to emotions – be applied to online shopping and, if so, which cognitive appraisals and which emotions are involved? (3) Can Web site interface be considered as a determinant of cognitive appraisals and, if so, which interface features affect which cognitive appraisals?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the relevant literature on Web site design guidelines, on the relationships between environment, affective states and consumer behavior as well as on emotions and their antecedents is examined. Then, the research model and hypotheses are presented, followed by an explanation of the research methodology applied. Research results are then presented and discussed, after which the research limitations are highlighted. Finally, theoretical and managerial contributions and avenues for future research are identified.

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