

B2C web site quality and emotions during online shopping episodes: An empirical study

Jean Éthier^{a,*}, Pierre Hadaya^a, Jean Talbot^b, Jean Cadieux^a

^a *Department of Information Systems and Quantitative Methods, Université de Sherbrooke, Canada*

^b *Department of Information Technologies, HEC-Montréal, Canada*

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of the quality of a web site on the cognitive process leading to consumers' emotions—considered as direct antecedents to shopping behaviors and operationalized as mental states of readiness arising from the appraisal of events. A parsimonious theoretical model was defined and tested with data collected from 215 web-shopping episodes during which consumers were shopping for low-touch products. Analysis of the results showed that web site quality had a positive impact on the cognitive appraisal of situational state, which in turn influenced five of the six emotions of the proposed model: liking, joy, pride, dislike, and frustration. Results also showed that a substantial number of shoppers experienced intensively the emotions of liking and joy. Moreover, this paper highlights several implications that could help managers and webmasters improve the quality of their web sites.

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1. Introduction

Without being the object of much media attention, the number of people shopping online is increasing steadily. Three out of four Internet users in the United States aged 14 and older are shopping online for retail products and services [21]. This represents 114.2 million online shoppers, approximately 12% more than in 2002. In Canada, an estimated 3.2 million households actively participated in e-commerce in 2003, up from 2.8 million the year before [65]. As a result, North American online sales have progressed rapidly over

recent years, notwithstanding the fact that B2C sales outpaced non-e-commerce sales by 25% between 1999 and 2002 in the U.S. [75]. Therefore, for well established Canadian and U.S. companies covering a wide range of retail sectors (e.g., J.C. Penney, Delta Airlines, Best Buy, the Target Group discount chain, and Indigo–Canada's largest book retailer), online retail sales are now the fast-growing part of their business. In addition, an increasing number of brick and mortar organizations selling expensive and complex goods are launching online initiatives to compete with pure-play online retailers; for example, Home Depot is now offering more than 1800 products including trash compactors, cook-tops, dishwashers, refrigerators, freezers, and wall ovens on its web site. Further, Birks & Sons – a Canadian manufacturer and retailer of fine jewellery – is using its web site to sell a wide variety of products advertised in its catalogue.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jean.ethier@usherbrooke.ca (J. Éthier), pierre.hadaya@usherbrooke.ca (P. Hadaya), jean.talbot@hec.ca (J. Talbot), jean.cadieux@usherbrooke.ca (J. Cadieux).

While the B2C market is growing and profitable, the competition for market share is also increasing in many retail sectors (e.g., books, travel, information, music, insurance, electronics). Therefore, to remain competitive, it is imperative for e-retailers to invest time and money to design, develop, and maintain high quality web sites, since customers are more likely to shop on web sites that exhibit high quality attributes.

Previous studies of web site quality have focussed mainly on defining and operationalizing the concept. Very few have attempted to measure the impact of web site quality on consumers' behaviors. Moreover, no study has yet attempted to measure the impact of web site quality on the cognitive and affective processes leading to behaviors sought by e-retailers (e.g., exploring the web site, requesting additional information, purchasing, and revisiting).

Based on literature covering the concepts of quality and atmospherics, as well as the theoretical foundations in psychology of emotions, we examined the relationship between web site quality and the shopper's cognitive process leading to emotions while shopping online. The hypotheses we postulated were:

- (1) Does the quality of a web site influence consumers' overall evaluation of the shopping episode? and
- (2) Does consumers' overall evaluation of the online shopping episode impact the intensity of the emotions felt by them?

The main objective was thus to demonstrate that web site quality is a noteworthy factor that affects the cognitive processes leading to emotions while shopping.

2. The importance of consumers' affective states

In the marketing field, research has shown that affect – the term for a set of specific mental processes, including feelings, moods, and emotions – is important in explaining the behavior of consumers. Using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm [45] as a foundation, several studies have found empirical evidence supporting the relationship between pleasure (whether individuals perceive the environment as being enjoyable or not) and several approach behaviors, such as staying longer in the store, purchase intentions, money spent in the store, impulse purchases, and affiliation with the store's personnel [5,19,20,62,69,76]. Such behaviors are sought by merchants and conditions for their emergence are of high priority. As such, merchants have invested time and effort on creating an ambience in stores that incited a positive affect.

In the IS literature, several studies on system use in traditional and online environments came to a similar conclusion: some affective states, such as anxiety and enjoyment, impacted user behavior [2,18,35,51,71].

Studies in marketing and IS have also shown that affective states can play the same role on the web. Based on approaches derived from the consumer behavior literature and flow [17], several studies concluded that enjoyment was an antecedent to different behaviors, such as the use of e-mail technologies [68], loyalty [34], web use [48], and intention to return to a web site [38]. In a study of users of online banking services, Bhattacharjee [8] showed that satisfaction was the strongest predictor of intent to continue. In this study, satisfaction was measured with four adjective-pairs related to affect: satisfied/dissatisfied, pleased/displeased, frustrated/contented, and terrible/delighted. Menon and Khan [46] established that the levels of arousal and pleasure experienced by consumers on the web influenced their later shopping behavior. Recently, Eroglu et al. [22] demonstrated that the atmospheric qualities of the web site influenced different affective states during the shopping episode and that this, in turn, influenced shoppers' attitudes, their level of satisfaction with the experience, and their approach/avoidance behavior.

However, these findings have generally been ignored by web designers and by those who propose guidelines to help them build more effective B2C web sites.

3. Theoretical background

3.1. Web site quality

Research on the concept of web site quality can be classified broadly into four complementary research categories. The first focused on web site functionalities (e.g., design, hypertext links, response time, and search engines) and/or content [7,24,33,36,52]. The dimensions identified have generally been: functional and navigational issues (speed and ease of navigation), content and style (currency and presentation), and contact information. Influenced by TAM, the second category included authors who considered that information quality, systems quality, service quality, and attractiveness were the essential components of web site quality [13,40,41,47]. The third category included studies that highlight service quality as a fundamental aspect of the overall quality of a web site [12,16,57,73,74]. The dimensions emphasized were reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility. The fourth category was composed of authors who believed that the principal criterion for web

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