Internet consumer value of university students: E-mail-vs.-Web users

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Abstract

What values are underlying the use of Internet? An empirical study ($N = 358$) shows five value factors: social, utilitarian, hedonic, learning and purchasing on the Internet. World Wide Web users score significantly higher on social and learning value, while E-mail users tend to value more a communication experience rather than a learning experience. Theoretical and practical implications are proposed. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. WWW-vs.-E-mail

While Internet use and e-commerce increase, consumers participate in a tremendous intangible experience daily. Until recently, Internet usage and consumption has been studied from an organizational perspective rather than from an interpersonal consumers' perspective. Although there are several investigations into the practices and profile of the Internet user (e.g. Hypersondage, 1996; RISQ, 1997, 1998), the scientific study of the behavior and the motivations of the Internet user is only at its beginning. One investigation by Maignan and Lukas (1997) has demonstrated that the activities taking place on the Internet may be understood according to users' representations of the Internet as a source of information, communication tool, object/place of consumption, or social system. These investigations show that the individuals use the Internet as a versatile tool. In a general way, the reasons for using Internet seem to be connected to leisure, everyday life, activities of learning, social relations and to working out of home offices. It is noticed that a tendency toward communication and training via the Internet accompanies the penetration of personal computers in the homes of users. In fact, consumers seem to use the Internet in order to communicate and to learn. Moreover, it is communication with the outside world which makes the personal computer justifiable in the home (Langlois, 1997).

1.1. WWW and E-mail are intangible experiences

In order to communicate with and learn from the outside world, the Internet user mainly uses two major functions of Internet: the electronic mail or visits a number of Web sites (Hypersondage, 1996; RISQ, 1997, 1998). Also, if a consumer wishes to make the purchase of a product or service, he will probably use one of these two functions. The commercial purchases on the Internet are the realm of a minority of users, but this phenomenon is slowly on the rise (RISQ, 1997, 1998). Indeed, we find ourselves facing a communication and information distribution network extremely rich in content, but whose users hesitate to buy for various reasons, in particular, for reasons of security (RISQ, 1997).

Actually, commerce on the Net resembles discussions in public places and stores, exchanging information on products and services but, then, buying only few goods. In other words, consumers use Internet as an experience without making a purchase. Consumers do not make full use of the virtual network. This leads us to wonder

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what motivates the consumer to use this virtual environment. Herein, this usage behavior is defined as a consuming behavior since the individual consumes an experience when using the Internet. However, there is little agreement concerning the nature of consumer behavior on the Internet (Maignan and Lukas, 1997).

In a way to understand the consumer behavior on the Internet, this article focuses on the reasons why people use Internet. In this research our viewpoint is that the individual grants "value" to the activities which he carries out. More precisely, we are interested in the value assigned by the Internet user to the virtual experience rather than to his needs or expectations. We can justify this choice by the consumer's difficulty of defining needs with precision vis-a-vis an intangible and complex experience such as the use of the Internet. Also, the more a service becomes intangible, the more difficult it becomes for the consumer to evaluate this same service (Hill, 1986). In the case of intangible services, expectations play a minor role due to the subjective nature of the experience (Jayanti and Jackson, 1991). Therefore, for consumers, the intangible experience is very difficult to evaluate or measure. If intangible experience is very difficult to evaluate for consumers, it is possible to identify the reasons why they interact with service.

1.2. The experiential perspective of consumption

The experiential perspective establishes the link between the affect and the cognition of the individual.[1] To understand the consumers, the experiential perspective is not interested solely any more in the pragmatic and rational nature of the behavior, but rather, in analyzing the behavior of the individual by placing emphasis on the primary process of thought and its relationship with the pleasure principle (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982).

The experiential perspective considers the products and services project elements which can be seen, heard, tasted or felt to be appreciated. The experience of using the Internet can thus be presented as a multi-sensorial experience wherein lie both cognitive and affective dimensions. From this point of view, a consumer will process the data associated with the content of the Web site or of electronic mail, while at the same time, seeking a certain degree of pleasure.

1.3. The value concept and Internet

It is by use of the environmental experiences that the consumer acquires his value. The value meaning is then acquired by use of Internet. Value is an interactive

relativistic preference experience (Holbrook, 1994, 1999).[2] To carry out his virtual experience, the Internet user must interact with an environment which is in constant evolution. Consequently, the attributes which justify the use of this environment are also likely to evolve. The value changes according to the interaction of the individual with his environment. Value may influence the purchase of products or services, but it also influences the use of the experience, like the Internet. Moreover, for each consumer, value is comparative, personal and depends on the consumption situation. In fact, value is relativistic (Holbrook, 1994, 1999). In this perspective, value is an experience where value resides in the consumption experience (Holbrook, 1994, 1999).

In this study, we consider the use of the Internet from this experiential perspective, where it is possible to establish that the value of the individuals is directed toward either a utilitarian, hedonist (Babin et al., 1994) or social or status dimension (Holbrook, 1999).[3]

The experiential perspective establishes that through the search for information, individuals have predispositions, being centered towards either a utilitarian or hedonic mode of search, but that this tendency differs according to the consumption context (Venkatraman and MacInnis, 1985). In a consumption experience, individuals mainly centered toward a utilitarian mode of search (i.e. cognitive) have a tendency to rationality and logic, and prefer cognitive stimulations. Other individuals, centered toward a hedonic mode of search, prefer to be stimulated by internal gratification, excitement and emotions. For these individuals the search for information lies in the search for feelings. In fact, the hedonism is characterized by a desire for social interaction (Crandall, 1979).

According to an experiential perspective, experiences of consumption can be classified according to either their hedonic or their utilitarian value (e.g. Belk, 1987; Sherry, 1990). The individual grants a utilitarian value to an object whereas he grants value to a utilitarian outcome stemming from a conscious search for information. The utilitarian value includes the expressions of accomplishment over the ability to complete the consumer task (Babin et al., 1994). This type of value can result from situations wherein the consumer is implicated in a collection of information which does not require pleasure (Bloch and Richins, 1983). In contrast to utilitarian value, the hedonic value can be seen as being pleasurable, or having an epicurean side (Sherry,

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[1] The study of non-cognitive behavior factors seems pertinent considering that the affective state is part of the Internet user's experience when using a computer (e.g. Ray, 1990).

[2] Holbrook (1994) defines value: "…as a *relativistic* (comparative, personal, situational) *reference* characterizing a subject's experience of interacting with some object." (p. 27). Consumer value is interactive because it involves an interaction between an object and a subject (Holbrook, 1999).

[3] In his viewpoint, Holbrook (1999) defines status value as: "…an extrinsic means toward the other-oriented end of achieving a favorable response from someone else." (p. 15).