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Digital divide and purchase intention: Why demographic psychology matters

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Abstract

The author examines the issue of digital divide from a demographic perspective. The influence of gender, age, education, and income on the likelihood to purchase over the Internet is empirically examined. Hypotheses are framed in the context of psychological correlates of the demographic variables. Findings show that these variables significantly influence the likelihood to purchase over the Internet and can be used to profile, segment, and target markets and develop public policies to bridge the digital divide.

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In its recent report, *Falling Through the Net: Toward the Digital Inclusion*, The Department of Commerce concluded that digital inclusion in the US is rapidly increasing and that groups that have traditionally been digital “have-nots” are now making dramatic gains (www.ntia.doc.gov 2000). However, the report also drew attention to the noticeable divide that continues to persist between people with different demographic characteristics such as age, income, education, ethnicity, and marital status. Although the issue of the digital divide has received extensive coverage, reports and discussions generally highlight only one aspect of the divide; the number of people who are digitally connected and have access to the Internet. What has received inadequate attention is the divide that separates people based on how

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they use the Internet. From both business and public policy perspectives, this divide has far reaching consequences.

The introduction of the Internet into our social system has raised theoretical questions and public policy concerns. One substantive theoretical question relates to factors that explain different uses of the Internet. For example, why are some people more likely to use the Internet for making a purchase and some less? And from a public policy perspective it would be valuable to identify people who are less likely to use the Internet.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, this paper explores relations between demographic variables and the likelihood of making a purchase over the Internet. Understanding these relations can facilitate the development of consumer profiles that can be used to segment and target customers. Similarly, these profiles can provide public policy officials with the information they need to reach people who can benefit from policies that encourage the use of the Internet. Thus, the objective of this paper is to empirically test relations between demographic characteristics and the likelihood of purchasing over the Internet.

1. Introduction

Building on the works of Robertson (1967), Bass (1969), and Rogers (1983, 1995), scholars have attempted to understand the influence of consumer characteristics on the adoption of new products. Two types of characteristics commonly studied are demographic characteristics (LaBay & Kinnear, 1981; Marks & Hughes, 1976) and personality traits (Brittingham, Goff, & Haring, 1989; Ehrlich & Lee, 1969; Gatignon & Robertson, 1989). Together these studies have enhanced our understanding of the product adoption process, especially of single-use products.

With the ongoing crisis in the dot-com business-to-consumer sector, the understanding of relations between demographic characteristics and the use of the Internet, a multiple-use product, is becoming increasingly important. Although there are many descriptive studies of Internet users (Ernst & Young, 2000; Smith & Clurman, 1997), there is a lack of empirical studies focusing on Internet shopping (Particelli & Angela da Rocha, 2001). The study of the Internet is important because, compared to other technological innovations, such as radios, TVs, and cellular phones, the Internet is different both in terms of the demand it places on users' cognition and willingness to learn to use the product. In particular, the multiple use of the Internet requires an understanding of the technology, the hardware as well as the software. The Internet is a multi-function, discontinuous innovation, and determining the influence of demographics on the likelihood of using the Internet to make a purchase becomes worthy of research.

2. Research context and hypotheses

Although the issue of digital divide between different ethnic groups has drawn considerable attention, the premise of this paper is that digital divide is not only

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