EMOTIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON CONSUMER COMMITMENT TO A WEBSITE: A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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1. INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of consumers use the Web to buy products and services. Five years ago, the amount of retail products purchased online in the U.S.A. represented less than 1% of all purchases; today, this percentage is 7% and it is expected to top 8% by 2014 [13]. According to e-commerce experts, the increase is due to the growing number of Web managers who have taken measures not only to facilitate browsing and broaden the spectrum of available information but also to reduce the negative perceptions of transaction security and privacy [8]. Nevertheless, it is widely agreed that the rate of e-shopping is still low and that other incentives should be investigated.

Several recent studies have shown that making e-shopping a pleasant experience for consumers can contribute considerably to the growth of e-commerce [10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18]. However, there is little research on the subject of consumer emotions during online shopping. Other than the general concept of affect, few of the emotions felt by e-shoppers have been identified [11, 12, 15, 16, 23, 25]. Moreover, no empirical study has yet established relationships between emotions such as joy, pride, frustration and fear and specific behaviors by online consumers.

The objective of this research proposal is to address these gaps in the literature by exploring the relationships between emotions felt by consumers during online purchasing and commitment to a website, a key consumer behavior. The next section presents the relevant theoretical background.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Since Donovan and Rossiter’s [6] pioneering work on store atmospheres, numerous researchers in the field of consumer behavior have explored the relationships between environment, affect and behavior, such as willingness to buy [2], time and money spent [26], number of items purchased [14], desire to affiliate with store personnel [7] and acceptance of a salesperson’s arguments [4].

Recently, some researchers have argued that the relationship between environment, affective state and behavior may also apply to online retailing, even though the Web lacks some of the dimensions found in bricks-and-mortar stores, such as temperature, odor, texture, and social interaction. For instance, Menon and Khan [19] showed that the level of arousal and pleasure consumers experience on the Web influences their subsequent shopping behavior. Eroglu et al. [9, 10] proposed and empirically validated a research model that extends the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) paradigm to e-retailing. In their view, the atmospheric cues of the online store, represented by content related to shopping goals as well as design elements that do not directly support the purchasing tasks (color, background patterns, typestyles and fonts), influence the outcomes of online shopping. This influence takes the form of approach/avoidance behaviors through the intervening effects of affective and cognitive states. Sautter et al. [24] extended Eroglu et al.’s model by proposing additional atmospheric elements such as vividness of information, interactivity, symbolism and social elements as determinants of shoppers’ cognitive and affective responses. Semeijn et al. [25] discovered that customers of e-retailers experienced joy both when shopping online and when receiving the products they purchased. This emotion was positively related to customer loyalty through customers’ perceptions of overall satisfaction. For their part, Li et al. [17] showed that joy and fear have a direct impact on privacy beliefs as well as on behavioral intentions to disclose personal information to online vendors.

Most research models on emotions in e-retailing have not considered cognitive factors as drivers to emotions. They have conceptualized emotions along the general dimensions expressed in the Pleasure-Arousal-Dominance Model [22]. Recently, a new stream of research has adopted a different perspective on emotions [11, 12, 16]. According to this approach, an emotion is considered as “a mental state of..."
reading that arises from appraisals of events or of one’s thoughts” [1, p. 184]. Thus, an emotion is created not by an event as such but by an evaluation (appraisal) of the event. In a study designed to investigate antecedents to emotions experienced in online shopping, Ethier et al. [12] found that three appraisals from the Appraisal Theory of Emotions [21] were particularly relevant to online shopping, as they impacted emotions such as liking, joy, pride, frustration and fear. The empirically validated appraisals were the appraisal of situational state, which accounts for the distinction between positive and negative emotions (perception of an event as being either consistent or inconsistent with one’s motives); the appraisal of probability (the certainty or uncertainty that motive-relevant aspects of the event will occur); and the appraisal of control potential (whether or not there is something one can do about the motive-relevant aspects of an event).

Consumer commitment is a multidimensional concept that encompasses several behaviors. As such, it has been defined as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” [5, p. 437]. Research has shown that, over time, committed consumers adopt behaviors that retailers appreciate. Committed consumers purchase more often, resist counter-persuasion, influence other consumers to purchase and are more willing to pay a premium price [5]. Prior research has empirically established that, in a retail context, consumer commitment to the retailer is influenced by emotional and judgmental reactions [3, 20]. To our knowledge, no study has yet explored the link between emotions felt by consumers during an online purchasing experience and their commitment to the retailer, specifically the website where the products and services are offered.

3. THE PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL

The research model shown in Figure 1 encompasses three different dimensions: cognitive, affective and behavioral. The appraisal of situational state, a key factor distinguishing positive and negative emotions [21], stands for the cognitive dimension. In the research model, it is conceptualized as an overall evaluation of the purchasing experience on a website. The affective dimension is composed of six emotions felt during the purchasing experience according to prior research: liking, joy, pride, dislike, frustration and fear. The behavioral dimension is embodied by the concept of consumer commitment to the website. It covers a set of actions such as revisiting, going the extra mile to visit the website again, and loyalty. Each variable of the research model is measured with items identified in previous empirical research. The overall evaluation of the purchasing experience is composed of three items from Ethier et al. [12], the six emotions are assessed with three items each from Ethier et al. [12] and consumer commitment is evaluated with three items from De Wulf et al. [5].

The research model predicts several relationships between constructs. As discussed above, previous research showed that the appraisal of situational state influenced several emotions during online shopping experiences. Situational state impacted both positive and negative emotions [11, 12]. We predict that this would also be the case when consumers purchase products or services on a website. Thus, the first set of hypotheses postulates that a purchasing experience that is favorably evaluated will positively influence the emotions of liking (H1), joy (H2) and pride (H3) and negatively influence the emotion of dislike (H4), frustration (H5) and fear (H6). Also, as discussed above, emotions are considered drivers of different behaviors. Positive emotions influence approach behaviors and negative emotions avoidance behaviors. Thus, the second set of hypotheses states that liking (H7), joy (H8) and pride (H9) felt during the purchasing experience will positively influence consumer commitment to the website, while dislike (H10), frustration (H11) and fear (H12) felt during the purchasing experience will negatively influence consumer commitment to the website.

4. METHODOLOGY

The methodology is considered by the authors includes both a qualitative and a quantitative phase. The qualitative phase of the research project under consideration can be described as a “past real-life” methodology since experienced e-shoppers would be asked in focus group sessions to recall and describe previous shopping experiences on the Web. The objective of this phase would be to finalize the proposed research model, as the relevance of each construct is tested, particularly the emotions. Furthermore, in order to evaluate whether covariates such as products/services and low/high complexity should be integrated into the research model, four groups of participants would be recruited: a group of e-shoppers who are very familiar with the purchase of low-implication products such as books, a group of e-shoppers who are very familiar with the purchase of low-implication services such as tickets for a show, a group of e-shoppers who are very familiar with the purchase of high-implication products such as computers, and a group of e-shoppers who are very
familiar with the purchase of high-implication services such as a vacation package.

The quantitative component of the research project could be described as an “immediate real-life” methodology and would be utilized to validate the research model; it would follow the qualitative phase. Several websites selling different products or services would be selected. As soon as a purchase is completed on one of the selected websites, an e-mail would be sent to the buyer asking him/her to promptly answer an online questionnaire derived from the questionnaire used in Éthier et al.’s [12] study and taking into account the conclusions of the qualitative phase.

5. CONTRIBUTIONS

From a theoretical perspective, this research project should (1) remind researchers that emotion is an essential variable to consider in models explaining consumers’ purchasing on the Web as well as other similar consumer behaviors; (2) confirm the relevance of integrating cognitive components as antecedents to emotion variables; and (3) highlight the value of using a variable such as consumer commitment.

From a practical perspective, the results of this research project should (4) introduce to Web designers and managers the emotions most often felt by consumers on a retail website; (5) inform them that the purchasing process they set up influences these emotions through a cognitive appraisal; and (6) give them guidelines to improve their website as determined by the items composing the research model’s variables.

References


