# Evolving the online customer experience - Is there a role for online customer support?

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## Abstract

This paper explores the online customer experience (OCE) in relation to a utilitarian search for government provided business support services. The aim of this research is to understand the variables that can influence customers searching for business support services online and to explore the potential role of online customer support via social interaction during a customer's online experience. Through the use of in-depth interviews and structural equation modeling, this study establishes a theoretical framework outlining the variables that have the potential to influence the online customer experience within the business support environment. This paper provides further theoretical understanding of the OCE through the introduction of information quality, website credibility and the length of time spent on the website, as variables influencing the OCE. In addition, this paper establishes the need for online customer support during a utilitarian search for business support information and services.

## 1. Introduction

Recently, services researchers have developed an interest in the online customer experience, most often centred on the online retail environment (Hoffman; Novak, 2009; Luo et al; 2011; Rose et al, 2012). Researchers, marketing practitioners and consultants have long expressed an interest in the customer experience and have agreed on its importance in producing outcomes of satisfaction, revisit intention and trust (Shobeiri et al, 2014). However, empirical research on the online customer experience (OCE) remains scant (Ahmed, 2011; Bigne et al, 2008), thus it is important for both academia and industry to understand how the customer experience can affect the online customer in a number of different searching and buying contexts.

Additionally, online social interaction through the use of web 2.0 functionality and social media has received much attention from marketing researchers as tools that allow customers to collaborate, communicate, share and connect with each other, (Kaplan; Haenlein, 2010; Mayfield, 2008; O'Reilly's, 2005) yet researchers have not explored the role of social interaction (sychronised communication) between customers and customer representatives in providing online customer support in relation to the customer experience. Given the recent technological developments providing online social interaction, this paper advances our understanding of the role of social interaction in providing online customer support in relation to the customer experience.

Recently, studies have investigated some of the drivers of a positive customer experience. This study steps outwith the online retail shopping environment and explores the customer experience in a utilitarian context of searching for Government provided business support information and services. Government economic development agencies provide business support services on business growth, leadership, developing employees, funding and day-to-day advice on running a business. Large proportions of public money are spent on the development of web services to provide business support, yet little research has explored the variables that may influence a customer's experience interacting with such services. The main objectives of this study are as follows:

1) Examine the variables influencing the online customer experience while searching for business support information and services.
2) Investigate the role of customer emotions while searching for Government provided business support services online.
3) Establish the role of customer support through social interaction in relation to a customer's experience.
4) Develop a comprehensive online customer experience model incorporating variables influencing the customer experience during a utilitarian search.

Through exploring these objectives this paper makes several contributions to services literature by adding and extending knowledge through developing and testing a new online customer experience model within a novel context. The paper first of all discusses the theoretical background of searching for information online and the customer experience. In the next section the research method is outlined, followed by the findings of the research. Lastly, a discussion of the findings, theoretical contribution, managerial implications, limitations and suggestions for future research are provided.

# 2.0 Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Information search

Within the area of marketing, research to date has somewhat neglected information search. Most research papers have been aiming to understand a customer's overall decision-making process in the context of purchasing a product (Engel et al, 1978). Within Engel et al's (1978) decision-making model, information search is a key part of the decision making process. Thus, it is important that marketers have an understanding of the underlying information search process. Like the customer experience, information search is regarded as a holistic process, involving the psychological constructs of cognition and affect (Kuhlthau, 1991). Kuhlthau (1991) research was the first to outline the role of emotions in searching for information. More recent research conducted by Flavian-Blanco et al (2010) found that emotions are prevalent when searching in the online environment prior, during and post search. Kuhltahu's (2004) influential research suggests that if customers do not

have positive emotions during search and instead experience emotions of frustration, anxiety and uncertainty, they are likely to abandon their search. As a result researchers have aptly outlined the importance of emotions in the customer experience.

## 2.2 Customer experience

The customer experience has been extensively discussed in the offline environment (Schmitt, 1999; Edvardsson et al, 2005). Meyer and Schwager's (2007) suggest the customer experience is the "internal and subjective response that customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company" (Meyer; Schwager, 2007, p.118). The customer experience is often theorised as a psychological construct, which is holistic and the subjective response resulting from touch-points with an organisation (Gentile et al, 2007). The psychological constructs of cognition and affect have been identified in numerous aspects of customer experience (Edvardsson, 2005),

According to Carbone and Haeckel (1994) the outcome of a customer experience is the creation of takeaway impressions that are subsequently stored in the memory of the customer. Numerous research studies have outlined that the customer experience is an important area of research due to the outcomes of a positive customer experience (Meyer; Schwager, 2007), namely satisfaction, trust, re-visit intention, re-purchase intention and loyalty (Schmitt, 1999; Edvardsson, 2005). Verhoef et al (2009) outline that a focus on the customer experience is of the upmost importance to organisations in order to have a competitive advantage, moving beyond that of assessing service quality.

## 2.3 Online Customer Experience

Empirical research on the online customer experience remains somewhat limited. Customers operating in the online environment encounter numerous components capable of influencing their experience with the website (Rose et al, 2012). Genitle et al (2007) found that customers interoperate different types of information on a website (text, imagery, video and audio) from both a cognitive and affective perspective. Novak et al's (2000) research suggested that customers are only influenced by their cognitive thoughts online. However, subsequent research (Rose et al, 2012; Wang et al, 2012; Verhoef et al, 2009; Ethier et al, 2006) outline emotions as playing a significant role with regard to the customer experience. As a result, in line with the search process (Kuhlthau, 1989), Rose et al (2012, p.309) suggest that the online customer experience is a "psychological state manifested as a subjective response to the website". Therefore, the customer can be seen as engaging in cognitive and affective processing due to the influence of stimulus material and characteristics of a website, which as a result forms an impression in the memory of the customer.

A comprehensive review of the literature outlines 14 variables capable of influencing the online customer experience. These variables include information quality, credibility, flow, telepresence, enjoyment, concentration, engagement, web skills,

challenge, interactivity, interactive speed, control (ease of use, customisation, connectedness), website aesthetics and emotions. (See Rose et al, 2012; Hoffman; Novak, 2009; Ding et al, 2009; Mollen; Wilson, 2010; Faiola et al, 2013; Brodie et al, 2013; Mathwick et al,
2005; Macmillan; Hwang, 2002; Song; Zinkhan, 2008; Hilligoss; Rieh, 2008;
Van Noort et al, 2012; Wu et al, 2013; Liu; Shrum, 2002; Lee; Jeong, 2010; Harris; Goode, 2010.) While these variables have been outlined individually many have overlapping features and can be deemed as antecedents of variables within various research studies. It is important that this study further explores the relevance of each of these variables.

## 2.4 Customer Support

However, often regarded as one of the fundamental differences within online and offline service environments is the element of social interaction, i.e. synchronised two-way communication (Nass; Moon, 2000). Within the offline environment, customers interact with service personnel in a face-to-face manner and in some instances may even make an effort to maintain a relationship with key service staff (Macintosh; Lockshin, 1997). In the online environment, the experience is often comprised by the inaccessibility of service staff along with machine responses (Yang; Jun, 2002). Over recent years however, technological advancements through web 2.0 functionality and social media have enabled the development of a more interactive social environment that provides B2B, B2C and C2C communication (Renard, 2013). The introduction of online social functions has developed what we see as the 'social customer' raising the expectation on being able to communicate online (Greenberg, 2010).

Many service providers are now utilising technology in order to provide customer service and support online (Truel et al, 2013). Research has shown that in the offline environment, encounters with other customers and with service staff have an influence on the customers experience during and after the service encounter (Tombs; McColl-Kennedy, 2003). Tombs and McCollKennedy's (2003) research finds that social interactions can give rise to individual's emotions and emotional displays, which in turn can influence the individual's behaviour. Truel et al (2013) discuss live chat technology that allows website users to seek 'service related information' from a real human representative who provide answers through the synchronous media (Truel; Connelly, 2013). Additionally, Chattaraman et al (2012) highlight three key purposes of live chat technology, firstly to serve as a search support function, secondly to serve as a basic decision support function and thirdly to serve as a navigational/procedural support function. Such support as highlighted by Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003) is often required in the offline environment and subsequently has an effect on the customer's experience. Kuhlthau's (1994) work on the zone of intervention highlighted the importance of social interaction with others in order to move through the search process.
According to Rafaeli's (1988) interactivity theory, a role exists for communication in providing customer support.

# 3.0 Methodology

The method used in this study is in two parts. First of all in-depth interviews are conducted to explore the research area, followed by an online experiment using Structural Equation Modelling to produce a new online customer experience model.

## 3.1 Interviews

Due to the limited research within the study's context and the little attention paid to the online customer experience, in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 SMEs from an array of industries (creative industries, financial services, technology and manufacturing) lasting approximately one hour. 94 businesses were approached to take part in the in-depth interviews, of which all had searched for business support information on a Government funded economic development agency's website within the last 30 days. The in-depth interviews helped to provide comprehensiveness and parsimony (Whetten, 1989), therefore deleting those variables that were not relevant to the study.

Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder and fully transcribed. The data from the transcripts were colour coded for particular topics and then categorised into relevant themes so that the data can be easily analysed.

## 3.2 Online Experiment

An online experiment was conducted on three selected Government funded business support websites with a sample size of 160 participants. Three tasks were set up for participants to complete on each website experiment (3x3). Participants were then given a business scenario and information to find, three mini tasks existed within the three main experiments. Participants were given 6 minutes for the tasks on each website, 18 minutes in total, with the experiment and questionnaire taking 36 minutes on average to complete. Figure 1.0 provides a graphical representation of the experiment procedure.
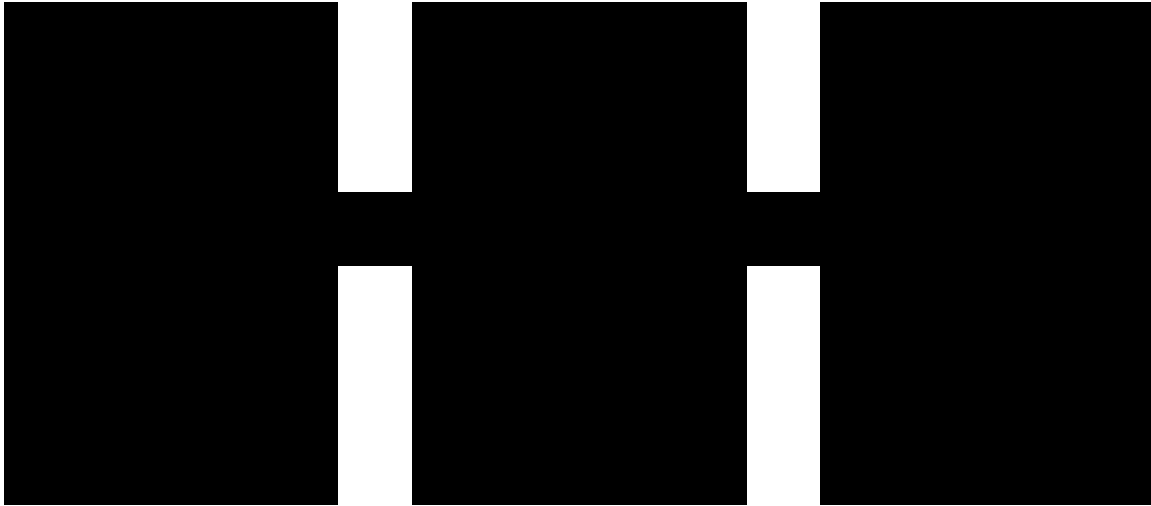
**Figure 1.0 Online Experiment Procedure**

Using an online experiment provided each respondent with the experience of searching for business support services across three different business support websites. Data were collected through a web-based questionnaire immediately after the completion of each experiment.

In order to test the hypothesised relationships in the study, structural equation modelling (SEM) was adopted using AMOS Graphics 22. Due to the online questionnaires being research administered, all 160 responses were usable with no missing data, which is consistent with the sample required for SEM (Byrne, 2013). The benefit of structural equation modeling is that the hypothesised model can be tested statistically in a simultaneous analysis of the whole model of variables (Byrne, 2013). The sampling frame consisted of a mix of business people, undergraduate and postgraduate business students with the UK. The sample achieved a relatively even split between males (47%) and females (53%). In terms of age group, the study achieved a good representation of ages, 18-25 (37%), 26-34 (28%), 35-42 (18%), 43-50 (14%) and 50+ (4%). On average participants were fairly knowledgeable and relatively confident at using the Internet.

### 3.3 Measure Development

The questionnaire consisted of 49 scale items measuring the variables outlined from the in-depth interviews. All scale items were measured on a 5point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. The session length for each task was recorded in order to aid in categorising successful or unsuccessful search. The average time for a successful search was worked out for each task (x3) in each experiment (x3). Those searchers who were faster than the average time to successfully complete the task were allocated 2 points. Those searchers who were slower than the average successful searcher were allocated 1 point and those who did not complete the task were allocated 0 points. In total the maximum number of points a participant could receive was 18 points (3 tasks x 3 experiments). In order to work within a 5 point scale, like all other scales within the study, the total points

for each participant was divided by 3.6. Using the recorded time for completing a successful search allowed the researcher to measure how successful a customer was in searching for their tasks. Additionally, as appropriate existing scales could not be found for the variable 'time spent on the website' a new scale was developed in line with scale development procedures (Churchill, 1979). See appendix 1 for all scale items and their corresponding sources where applicable.

# 4.0 Results

## 4.1 In-depth Interviews

This study finds ten attributes that influence the online customer experience some of which can be considered antecedent variables of other higher order variables, thus we are presented with 6 variables capable of influencing the customer experience during an online utilitarian search for business support information; namely, website aesthetics, control, information quality, website credibility, flow and the length of time spent on the website.

- *Website Aesthetics*

Respondents commented on the need for a well designed website that looked aesthetically pleasing and offered a logical layout in turn making navigation simple for the user. The concept of control was found to be an important variable with the potential to influence the customer's experience. Respondents commented on the need for a site to be easy to use (not challenging), customisable and have the feeling of being able to do what the user requires, thus providing the customer with a level of control over what they are able to do.

- *Control*

The concept of control emerged as an important variable with the potential to influence the customer's experience. Respondents commented on the need for a site to be easy to use, thus providing the user with a level of control over what they are able to do. In addition, respondents outlined the need to be able to identify their own business when searching for support information, as a result being able to receive content that is customised or customisable for businesses may provide the experience required. Respondents pointed out that they want to be able to narrow down their search and find content that is relevant to them. Some respondents explicitly commented that being in control of what they are doing is important to them. Respondents wanted to be able to go to parts of the site that they wanted to see and not have the website dictate what they do. Thus, it is important that control is further explored in the experimental stage of the research and included in the theoretical framework.

- *Information Quality*

The quality of the information provided by a business support site is quite clearly essential to businesses. Respondents commented that key business decisions may be made from the information that is provided to them, as a result it can be expected

that the quality of the information needs to be high. While the quality of the information was seen as being important to businesses, respondents further commented on the problem of information overload. Many respondents suggested that the quality of information could be affected by the mass of information that is often provided. Respondents further discussed the time-constraints of searching through such information. Some respondents outlined the need to try and confirm facts through their own knowledge or from other websites. Respondents also discussed the need for information to be accurate in terms of spelling and grammar; such mistakes can leave businesses questioning the professionalism and quality of the information provided by the organisation, as well as the information being current and easily understandable. Respondents aptly highlighted that if the quality of information provided is not good, you simply move on to the next website which is only a click away. Thus, it can be determined that Information Quality is another important variable to explore further in this study and shall be included in the theoretical framework.

- *Website Credibility*

Many respondents commented that the credibility of the website is important to them when conducting a search for business support information. Respondents outlined that in order to evaluate the credibility of the website, respondents look to the surface characteristics of the website such as the look of the site, the brand name, URL, navigation and the ability to contact the organisation. Respondents also commented on the need to confirm the information with information from another source or person within the field. This can be seen as an element of factual accuracy confirmation. Respondents outlined that anyone can simply create a website or a blog offering business support, however, respondents commented that the credibility of that website needs to be brought into consideration. Respondents highlighted the importance of decisions made form the information sought; as a result credibility as well as the information quality appear to be a priority for businesses.

- *Flow*

Further exploration outlined that being able to focus on the customer's task without distraction and becoming absorbed in what the user is doing is an important element in searching for business support information, thus being in the state of flow. However, conversely to other studies, respondents outlined that having a level of enjoyment, which is often seen as a part of flow, is not important to them in the context of searching for business support services, rather being able to focus on the task at hand is seen as more important.

- *Time spent on the website*

The variable of time became very apparent through each individual in-depth interview. Each respondent discussed the issue of time-constraints when searching for business support information.  Respondents discussed the importance of being able to find information quickly without wasting any time. Respondents highlighted that they do not have the time to spend 20mins - 1 hour searching for information, the running of the business needs to be taken care of and thus, time can not be wasted. During discussions around other variables that have the potential to influence a customer's

experience, the variable of time resonated each conversation. It is clear to see from the findings of the in-depth interviews that businesses are unwilling to spend time searching for business support information. Respondents further commented that any means that can be provided to help them find information in a timely manner is beneficial. Respondents discussed the goal directed nature of their search and therefore highlighted the need to find the information they are looking for and then leave. This for respondents can be seen as the optimum experience.

- *Customer Support*

Respondents illustrated that searching for online business support information is not a day-to-day task and therefore may only be carried out once or even twice per year, thus, respondents suggest that assistance is often required in an unfamiliar environment. Respondents suggested that being able to interact with a company representative, having the ability to talk to someone about their needs and the information they are looking for can help to reduce the level of frustration, anxiety and uncertainty over their information seeking experience. Respondents commented that being able to communicate with someone to seek support provides the experience that they are looking for and somewhat expect.

- Search Success

Respondents of the depth interviews illustrated that if they are unable to find the information or services they require they will abandon their search and thus result in an unsuccessful search. Respondents commented that searching online can become a frustrating task. Therefore, should customers encounter negative emotions of frustration, confusion and disappointment, customers will not have a positive experience and will be dissatisfied with their search. Further to this, respondents suggested that if they are required to spend longer than perceived necessary searching for information or services they will likely abandon their search on the website and move to an alternate service provider.

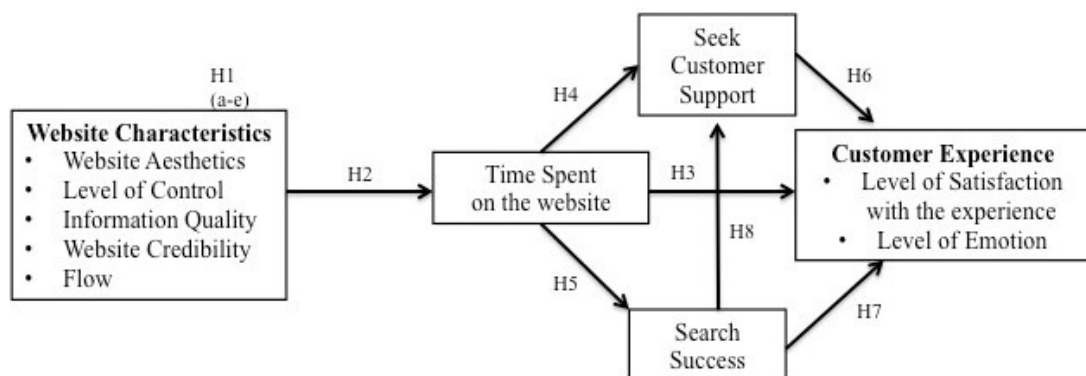Following the insights from the in-depth interviews, we have reached the conceptual model in figure 2.



**Figure 2: Hypothesised Customer Experience Model**

## 4.2 Preliminary Analysis

Several analyses were preformed before going on to estimate the research model using SEM. First of all a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted between business people and postgraduate/undergraduate business students across the three experiments to identify if any differences existed between the responses of the two groups on the variables within the study. The results of this test showed that there was no statistical significant difference between business people and business students, Wilks' Lambda = .40, $f$ (20.00, 20.00) = 1.514, p = .181. Thus, as a non-significant result was achieved p = > .05 (.181), it can be concluded that there is no difference in responses to the questions within the questionnaire between business people and business students across all 3 experiments. Therefore, the sample used in the study can be deemed as being appropriate. Additionally, a second repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to identify if any differences existed between the three websites used in the study. The results showed, Wilks' Lambda = .19, $f$ (20.00, 140.00) = 29.920, p = .000, which can therefore be concluded as a significant statistical difference as the p value is < .05. As a result, this provides the study with a broad and representative set of websites that can produce generlisable results for economic development agencies operating business support websites.

Secondly, the study tested for the potential influence of four control variables, age, gender, usage of the Internet and confidence using the Internet. In order to carryout such tests a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted for each control variable. The results of the MANOVA test showed no significant difference with regard to age group (Wilks Lambda = .67, $f$ (40, 596.000) = 1.723, p = .069). In addition, the MANOVA test showed no significant difference with regard to gender (Wilks' Lambda = .937, $f$ (10, 149) = 1.000, p = .447). Again the result of the third MANOVA test showed no significant difference with regard to how often participants use the Internet (Wilks' Lambda = .76, $f$ (30, 432.150) = 1.498, p = .073). The last MANOVA test conducted found that there was a significant difference between the level of Internet Confidence a customer has on the variables within the study (Wilks' Lambda = .55, $f$ (30, 432.150) = 3.404, p = .000). Thus, only one control variable is included in the structural model (Level of Internet Confidence) as all other control variables produced non-significant results from the MANOVA tests.

Thirdly, scale reliability tests and data normality tests were conducted prior to structural modelling. In order to conduct reliability tests cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated. The value for each scale was above the critical value of .7 (Pallant, 2013). Thus the scales offer discriminant validity. Appendix 1 outlines the Cronbach's alpha values. In order to determine if the data are normally distributed, a z-score from the skewness and kurtosis values need to be calculated, this is done by dividing the skewness and kurtosis values by their standard error. The z-score for each variable falls between the values of -2.58 and +2.58 after a conservative statistical significance level of .01 is set, therefore the data can be considered as normally distributed.

## 4.3 Structural Equation Modelling

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was adopted in this study with the use of AMOS 22. Structural equation modelling with an analysis of moment structures is one of the most commonly used statistical techniques that is adopted in order to conduct analysis on structural theory through a confirmatory approach (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). Structural Equation Modelling involves two important aspects (1) that the casual process that is being studied is represented by a series of structural (regression) equations and (2) the structural relationships can be modelled pictorially to provide a clear representation of the theory being studied.

Structural equation modelling is conducted in two steps, first the measurement model and second the structural model. Therefore in the first step of the structural equation modelling, the CFA measurement model was specified and estimated. The fit statistics of the model were good ($x^2$ = 2.65, CFI = .960, NFI = .954, GFI = .949, SRMR = .040, RMSEA = .047, RMR = .015). Further to the fit statistics all loadings were adequate and significant at p = .000.

Thus, due to a good fitting measurement model, the study can proceed to the second step, which involves the specification and estimation of the hypothesised structural model as shown in figure 1. The fit statistics of the structural model showed goodness of fit ($x^2$ = 2.61, CFI = .973, NFI = .964, GFI = .969, SRMR = .019, RMSEA = .047, RMR = .010), in addition the standardised path coefficient regression weights, $R^2$ values and statistical significance are shown in table 2 and figure 3.

| | Estimate | P |
|---|---|---|
| Time Spent on Site <--- Web Characteristics | -.452 | *** |
| Customer Experience <--- Web Characteristics | .751 | *** |
| Seek Customer Support <--- Web Characteristics | -.453 | *** |
| Search Success <--- Web Characteristics | .582 | *** |
| | Estimate | P |
| Time Spent on Site <--- Level of Internet Confidence | .294 | *** |
| Customer Experience <--- Time Spent on Site | -.323 | *** |
| Seek Customer Support <--- Time Spent on Site | .528 | *** |
| Search Success <--- Time Spent on Site | -.531 | *** |
| Positive Emotion <--- Customer Experience | .867 | *** |
| Level of Satisfaction <--- Customer Experience | .811 | *** |
| Flow <--- Web Characteristics | .831 | *** |
| Credibility <--- Web Characteristics | .701 | *** |
| Info Quality <--- Web Characteristics | .763 | *** |
| Control <--- Web Characteristics | .913 | *** |
| Aesthetics <--- Web Characteristics | .662 | *** |
| Customer Experience <--- Seek Customer Support | -.614 | *** |
| Customer Experience <--- Search Success | .544 | *** |
| Seek Customer Support <--- Search Success | -.583 | *** |
| Search Success <--- Level of Internet Confidence | -.125 | .017 |

*** ≤ .000

**Table 1 Structural Path Regression Weights**

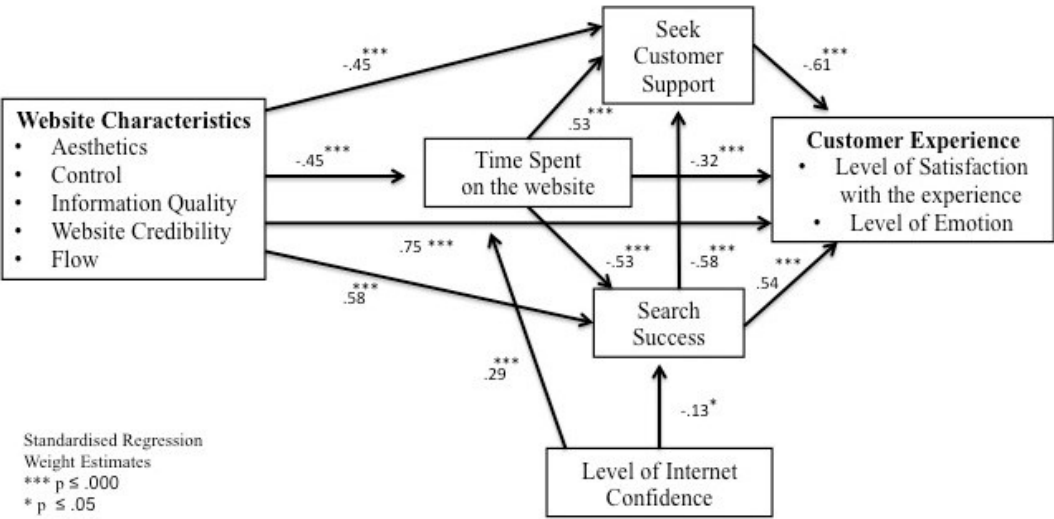|  | Estimate |
|---|---|
| Website Characteristics | .260 |
| Time Spent on Site | .291 |
| Customer Experience | .791 |
| Seek Customer Support | .592 |
| Search Success | .629 |
| Aesthetics | .438 |
| Control | .831 |
| Info Quality | .581 |
| Credibility | .479 |
| Flow | .768 |
| Satisfaction | .710 |
| Positive Emotions | .828 |

**Table 2 R² Values**



**Figure 3 Structural Equation Model**

Thus, significant relationships can be seen in table 1 and figure 2 in relation to the hypotheses previously outlined in figure 1. All hypothesised relationships show high regression weights all of which are significant at the .000 value. Therefore, the study concludes that the proposed model with its mediating structure has supporting statistical and theoretical evidence.

# 5.0 Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the variables capable of influencing a customer's experience while searching for Government provided business support information and services through developing a new online customer experience model. Additionally, the study aimed to explore the role of customer support through synchronised social interaction online, a phenomenon unexplored in relation to the customer experience. Insights into the findings of the research will now be provided along with a discussion on the theoretical and managerial implications of the research.

## 5.1 Theoretical contributions

This paper makes a number of theoretical contributions to enhance our understanding of the online customer experience. The first contribution is the introduction of exploring the online customer experience within a utilitarian context of online business support. Past research has explored the customer experience in relation to the online shopping environment (Ha et al, 2010; Khalifa; Liu, 2007; Hoffman; Novak, 2009) and investigating outcomes of repurchase intention (Rose et al, 2012). This paper has provided theoretical insight into a utilitarian search for online information during the customer's journey to finding information.

Secondly, the findings of the research establish that the variables of information quality and website credibility influence the customer experience during a utilitarian search for business support information, both of these variables have been overlooked in previous studies. In addition, this paper finds that an underlying latent variable named 'website characteristics' encompassing website aesthetics, level of control, information quality, website credibility and flow together effect the online customer experience. The findings of the in-depth interviews and the online experiment highlighted the overlapping features of each of the variables. Previous studies (Khalifa; Liu, 2007; Song; Zinkhan, 2008; Hoffman; Novak, 2009; Ha et al, 2010; Rose et al, 2012) have outlined that numerous variables are capable of influencing the customer experience, however this study extends the current body of literature by introducing a new higher order variable and asserting the equal importance of each of these variables together influencing the customer's experience, proving hypothesis H1(a-e). The findings of this research show that the combined variable of 'website characteristics' has a direct and indirect effect on the customer experience through the length of time spent on the website, requiring to seek customer support and through the success of the search.

This paper has furthered our theoretical understanding of the online customer experience through establishing the unidentified variable of the length of 'time spent on the website' in influencing the customer experience, the need to seek customer support and the success of the search, proving hypothesis H3, H4 and H5. Previous studies exploring the online customer experience have overlooked the variable of the length of time spent on the website. Limited research from Ludin and Cheng (2014) and Luo et al (2010) acknowledge that the length of time spent searching online may be influenced by the quality of the information provided. The findings highlight that the website characteristics (including: website aesthetics, level of control, information quality, website credibility and flow) influence how long

customers are willing to spend on the website, poor website characteristics result in customers spending longer searching on the website, proving hypothesis H2. In turn, the longer customers perceive to spend searching for information or services on the website results in customers having a negative experience, resulting in negative emotions and dissatisfaction with the experience. Additionally, the structural model finds that the length of time spent on the website effects the customers likelihood in having a successful search. Thus, the longer customers are required to spend searching on the website the less likely they are to have a successful search.

Due to the emergence of the variable time spent on the website, this paper made a further theoretical contribution through developing and validating a new five point likert scale to measure 'time spent on the website' with four measurement items derived from the in-depth interviews. Following a further review of the literature and due to the fact 'time spent on the website' is a new variable to be introduced to marketing literature, no relevant scale could be obtained to measure the variable. Thus, in line with Churchill's (1979) scale development procedures as previously discussed a new validated scale has been introduced to the literature.

Moreover, this paper outlined the collection of positive customer emotions as well as a level of customer satisfaction as a measure of the customer experience. This is in line with previous studies suggesting that the customer experience is made up of cognitive (Novak et al, 2000; Hoffman; Novak, 2009) and affective (Rose et al, 2012) processes. The results showed high regression weights with statistical significance at .000. Therefore this study further confirms previous studies measures and theoretical underpinning of the online customer experience.

An important objective of this study is to examine the role of social interaction in providing customer support in relation to the online customer experience. This paper found multiple significant relationships with regard to the online customer experience and online customer support.  The findings outlined that should customers feel they are spending more time on the website than they feel necessary they will require online customer support through one to one interaction with a company representative. The findings also showed that if customers perceive the website characteristics (including website aesthetics, level of control, information quality, website credibility and the level of flow) positively then customers will not require online customer support. However, as previously discussed this relationship is mediated by the length of time spent on the website. Therefore while the website characteristics may be perceived positively, the length of time spent searching on the website can result in customers requiring to seek customer support. Conversely, where customers perceive the website characteristics as being poor, customers will require online customer support with a company representative.

In addition, the online experiment identified that customers who have an unsuccessful search require customer support in order to help them find the information or services they require, proving hypothesis H8. Respondents of the online experiment and in-depth interviews suggested that searching for business support information is not a day-to-day task and therefore it can be difficult to find

the information required and thus support is often needed. Finally, the structural model illustrates that customers who need to seek customer support do so as they are having a poor experience, with negative emotions of frustration, anxiety and disappointment as well as being dissatisfied with the experience, thus proving the hypothesised relationship of hypothesis H6. The findings illustrated that when customers do not have a level of control over the website, being able to move through the website with ease and customise the website to their own individual needs then they are likely to require customer support in order to find the services they require.

Furthermore, respondents also elaborated on the aesthetics of the website as a fundamental reason for requiring customer support, where a poor design, look and feel of the website gives off the impression that the website may be difficult to use as well as a negative judgement on the credibility of the website. The comments from the respondents further support the rational of the higher order variable of website characteristics and therefore the reason why each of the variables combining to create 'website characteristics' should be considered together with equal importance. The literature to date has not explored the need for online customer support in the form of synchronised social interaction in relation to the customer experience. This paper specifically establishes this requirement in the context of a utilitarian search for business support information and services.  These finding add significant value to research within the domain of the online customer experience.

The findings further elaborate that the success of the search has an effect on the customer's experience. A strong relationship between the search success and the customer experience was found, where if a customer was successful in their search the customer experience would increase by .54 having a significant effect increasing positive emotions and the level of satisfaction with the experience. Therefore it is important to acknowledge the variables of website characteristics encompassing website aesthetics, level of control, information quality, website credibility and flow as well as time spent on the website influencing the success of the search in order for customers to have a positive experience educing positive emotions and satisfaction with the experience

In addition, this paper found that the customer's level of Internet confidence has an effect on the length of time customers are willing to spend on the website. The more confidence the customer has in using the Internet will result in the confident searcher being unwilling to spend longer than they perceive necessary searching for information or services. Thus, confident searchers are even more time sensitive than less confident searchers. Further results showed that the level of confidence a customer has in using the Internet has a relationship with the success of the search. Interestingly, the results find that those who are confident in searching are likely to abandon their search on a business support website. Participants of the in-depth interviews and the online experiment elaborated that using a business support website was not a familiar activity, thus while those participants may be confident in using the Internet in general, the confidence in using a business support website may actually be low in comparison and therefore result in customers having an unsuccessful search. However, based on the psychological reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) where past experiences create expectations, confident searchers appear to be become

frustrated and disappointed in the website than those less confident searchers, thus confident searchers are quicker to abandon their search and seek customer support than those less confident searchers.

## 5.2 Managerial Implications

This study offers economic development agencies offering online business support services numerous managerial implications. The findings suggest that the website aesthetics, the level of control the website provides customers, the quality of the information on the website and the websites provision to customers to allow them to concentrate on their task (flow) altogether have an influence on the customer's experience. The website aesthetics refer to the design, look and layout of the website. The level of control refers to how easy the site is to use and the ability to customise the experience by filtering and controlling content relevant to the customer. The quality of the information refers to the accuracy, relevance, how current and the usefulness of information provided on a website. Website credibility refers to the assessment of key surface characteristics of the site, including an assessment of the sources, checking accreditation or company credentials, the brand of the website, the URL and the websites aesthetics. Lastly, flow refers to the extent to which the website allows the customer to concentrate and focus, while feeling absorbed and engrossed in the task. Thus mangers and marketing professionals within economic development agencies ought to pay close attention to each of these variables in providing customers with a positive experience.

Much industry research refers to the importance of customers spending a longer length of time on the website as a benchmark of a successful website. This research highlights to marketers and managers of economic development agencies to use such a benchmark with caution as this research finds that the longer customers spend searching on a website, the less likely they are to have a positive experience as well as being less likely in having a successful search. Thus, marketers should offer business support websites that allow customers to complete their tasks in a timely manner.

As has been previously discussed, a distinctive difference between the online and offline environment is the ability to socially interact with a customer representative. With the advancements of recent technology, new features such as live chat technology and online customer helpdesks allow organisations to offer synchronised customer support online. The research findings suggest that online customer support is required via synchronised social interaction when the website characteristics are poor, the customer is required to spend longer than perceived necessary and when the customer does not have a successful search. Thus, a further implication for marketers and managers of economic development agencies is to provide customers with online support, simply providing customers with information and selfservice functions may be a disservice to customers. An introduction of online customer support may help to prevent customers abandoning their search.

## 5.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research

The findings and the contributions of this study are somewhat constrained by certain limitations, of which opportunities for future research arise. While the online experiment outlined actual behaviour, in order to further explore customer support online via synchronised social interaction, researchers could develop a website with a form of customer support such as a 'live chat' function and one without to compare the difference on the customer's experience. This would help to advance the research undertaken in this study.

Additionally, it would be insightful for economic development agencies to identify if the same variables influence the customer experience on mobile devices. This study conducted the research in the situation of searching on desktop and laptop devices. With the rise of customers using mobile devices to access the Internet for information and services it would be prudent to investigate if differences exist.

Finally, while managerial implications apply for economic development agencies, this research has found that online customer support is required if a customer perceives to spend longer than necessary on the website or if the customer perceives the website characteristics as being poor or if the customer is having an unsuccessful search. It would valuable for future research studies to explore if a role for online customer support exists within other contexts including the popular online shopping context.

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