THE ONLINE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE - ESTABLISHING THE ROLE OF ONLINE SOCIAL SUPPORT.
THE CASE OF SEARCHING FOR BUSINESS SUPPORT SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the online customer experience in relation to Government provision of 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 social interaction during a customer's online experience. This study provides a theoretical framework outlining the variables that have the potential to influence the online customer experience within the business support environment. The initial methodology is outlined along with an explanation of the current phase of the research.

KEYWORDS

Online Customer Experience, Social Interaction, Online Services, Business Support

INTRODUCTION

Only over the past number of years have services researchers developed an interest in the online customer experience, most often centred on the online retail shopping environment (Hoffman and 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 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 customer online 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 a lot of attention from marketing researchers as tools that allow customers to collaborate, communicate, share and connect with each other (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Mayfield, 2008; O'Reilly's, 2005). Yet, researchers have not explored the role of social interaction, one-to-one communication on the customer's online experience.

Stepping outwith the online retail shopping environment, this paper explores the customer experience in the context of searching for Government provided business support information and services. Government economic development agencies provide businesses support services on business growth, leadership, developing employees, funding and day-to-day advice on running a business. Large proportions of public money is spent on the development of web services to provide business support, yet little research has explored the factors that may influence a customer's experience interacting with such services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Firstly it is important that we have a sound understanding of the process of searching for information. Information search is a key part of the consumer decision-making process before making a purchase or choosing a service (Engel et al, 1978). Yet,

information search receives little attention from marketing researchers. Numerous information science researchers have developed models depicting the information search process (Taylor, 1968; Belkin, 1980; Wilson, 1981; Dervin, 1983; Ellis, 1989 Kuhlthau, 1991) acknowledging both the cognitive and affective component in information search. Marketing research has outlined the role of affect, emotions and mood in consumer behaviour (Ethier et al, 2006). Kuhlthau (2004) and Flavian-Blanco (2012) argue that emotions play a significant role in information search with Rose et al (2012) outlining the importance of emotions on the customer's experience.

A comprehensive review of the literature outlines 15 variables capable of influencing 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, level of confidence using the Internet and emotions. (See Rose et al, 2012; Hoffman and Novak, 2009; Ding et al, 2009; Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Faiola et al, 2013; Brodie et al, 2013; Mathwick et al, 2005; Macmillan and Hwang, 2002; Song and Zinkhan, 2008; Hilligoss and Rieh, 2008; Van Noort et al, 2012; Wu et al, 2013; Liu and Shrum, 2002; Lee and Jeong, 2010; Harris and Goode, 2010.) It is important that this study further explores the relevance of each of these variables.

Often regarded as one of the fundamental differences within online and offline environments is the element of social interaction, i.e. synchronised two-way communication (Nass and Moon, 2000). Over recent years however, technological advancements through web 2.0 functionality and social media have enabled the development for 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 provides 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 and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). Tombs and McColl-Kennedy'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 behavior. 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 an enhanced experience.

METHOD

Due to the limited research within the study's context and the little attention paid to research on social interaction online in relation to the customer experience, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 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).

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.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The findings of the depth-interviews show that from the 14 variables identified in the literature, 7 variables appear to influence the customer experience when searching for business support information including; website aesthetics, flow, control, website credibility, information quality and emotions. In addition to the literature, a seventh variable of 'time spent' was identified through the depth interviews.

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.

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.

Additionally, respondents commented that the credibility of the website is important, evaluating surface characteristics of the site such as the look of the site, the brand name, URL, navigation and the ability to contact the organisation. The quality of the information provided by a business support site was quite clearly essential. 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.

The variable of time became very apparent through each individual in-depth interview. Respondents discussed the importance of being able to find information quickly without wasting any time. The variable of time resonated each conversation with respondents with regards to all other variables. The findings of the in-depth interviews illustrate that businesses are unwilling to spend a protracted period of time searching for business support information and thus an important variable to further explore.

Respondents highlighted a number of different emotions that they experience when searching for information online including, frustration, uncertainty and confusion. However, positive emotions of confidence, optimism and satisfaction were also expressed. Emotions appeared to be inherently linked with the variables of time, website aesthetics, control, information quality, website credibility and the ability to concentrate on the task (flow).

Moreover, in terms of social interaction, respondents commented that as searching for business support information is not a day-to-day task and therefore may only be carried out once or even twice per year, respondents suggest that assistance is often

needed in an unfamiliar environment. Respondents commented that being able to communicate with someone to seek support provides the experience that they are looking for and somewhat expect. Thus we have reached a conceptual framework to be tested in this study, which can be seen in figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
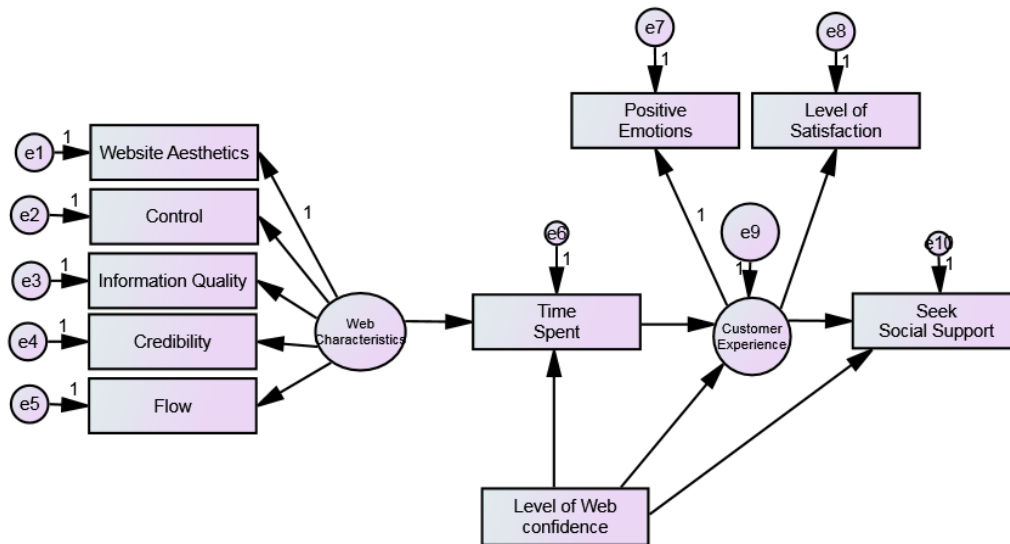
NEXT STAGE OF THE RESEARCH

Following the in-depth interviews, the current phase of this research is to test the conceptual framework shown in figure 1 derived from the literature and the analysis of the in-depth interviews.

In order to test the conceptual framework an online experiment has been conducted on three selected business support websites with a sample size of 160 respondents. Three tasks were set up for participants to complete on each website. Participants were then given a business scenario and information to find, three mini tasks exist within the three main tasks. Participants were given 6 minutes for each task, 18 minutes in total, with the experiment taking 36 minutes on average to complete. Using an experiment provided each respondent with the experience of searching for business support services across three different business support websites. Data are collected through an online survey immediately after the completion of each task.

Early quantitative findings indicate significant relationships between the independent variables of website aesthetics, flow, control, website credibility and information quality on time and the customer experience. Additionally, those who are not satisfied with there experience seem to need to seek social interaction. The illustrated relationships outlined in figure 1 are currently being tested through structural equation modelling in AMOS Graphics.

CONCLUSION

It is important that marketing research expands beyond the usual realms of research within the online customer experience environment. This research focuses on Government provided business support websites, which aims to fill a research gap. Additionally, understanding the role of social interaction on the customers online

experience helps to address an area of research that has been neglected to date. Much recent research within the online domain has focussed on 'social' in terms of social media, however this research expands beyond this to identify if a role exists for service staff providing social support online.

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