Theorizing Intercultural Accommodation in Consumer E-Commerce

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ABSTRACT

Consumer e-commerce extends the marketplace of traditional business and brings in business opportunities in online retailing and service. As a consequence of intensive competition among online vendors, the need to capture more customers has become crucial. The consumer group is under a huge change due to demographic shift and immigration laws. Population of minorities has dramatically increased suggesting a growing buying power of ethnic groups. To effectively attract ethnic consumers into consumer e-commerce Web sites, we propose the Web-based intercultural accommodation model. Drawing upon literature in linguistic, sociology, and Web information system success, this model offers a theoretical explanation of online ethnic consumers' behavioral intention to use e-commerce Web site. The conceptual model recognizes the potential roles of ethnicity attributes of individual consumers as well as the use of ethnic pertaining Web site designs in accommodating ethnic consumers. The theoretical model is subject to empirical validation.

Keywords: E-Commerce, Ethnicity, Intercultural Accommodation Model, Research in Progress, Technology Acceptance Model, User Behavior, Web Site Design

INTRODUCTION

The growth of the World Wide Web and its user groups has paved a way to the rise of Web-based consumer e-commerce (Gupta and Sharma 2003). Such web-based information system represents a new frontier for business to establish an online presence by launching virtual stores, which exist in the cyberspace offering merchandise and services. Due to the low setup cost, transaction cost, maintenance cost, and increasing business opportunities (24/7), the prevalence of the e-commerce Web sites on retailing and services has been stimulated. The Web creates business opportunities for companies ranging from small start-ups to Fortune 100 giants. This prosperity in consumer e-commerce Web sites, however, introduces enormous competition into the online market. Meanwhile, the higher availabilities of broadband Internet access and personal computers have granted online users with capabilities and convenient access to online shopping. Customers have grown to be powerful, demanding, and utilitarian in their online
shopping (Koufaris and Hampton-Sosa 2004) which shifts the locus of power from vendors to customers (Raman 1997). As more and more business opportunities have been brought to the Internet, how to fully utilize Web site to attract customers has become a major issue. Not only does this capture immediate business opportunities (Longwell 1999), it also casts great impact on customers’ return purchases in the future and the buildup of their loyalty, which is poor in consumer e-commerce nowadays (Morrisette, McQuivey et al. 1999).

Due to the demographic shift and changes of immigrant policy, the minority groups in the United States have kept growing. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that, between 1990 and 2000, the minority population (e.g., Hispanics, African Americans, and Asian Americans) grew by approximately 34% while the white population grew by 5.9% (Cotton 2002). The current U.S. population is over 289 million, over 30% of which is made up of minority ethnic groups. The growing influence of the minority population is also reflected in their buying power. Between 1990 and 2000, the household income growth for African, Hispanic, and Asian American households was 32.5%, 24.3%, and 23.1%, respectively. The speed of growth surpasses that for white households at 14.2%. Consequently, it is important that online product and service vendors attend to the minority groups and adopt successfully strategies to attract them as customers. In the context of e-commerce, companies rely heavily on the Web site designs to accomplish this goal. Therefore, it is of a high priority for researchers and practitioners to study the Web site design options that may attract more ethnic consumers.

This paper explores the ethnic issues in consumer e-commerce. Drawing upon the relevant literature in linguistic, sociology, and web information system success, we uncover the theoretical underpinning of ethnicity involving consumer e-commerce phenomena. The paper presents the Web-based Intercultural Accommodation Model, a conceptual framework that explains the relationships among individual ethnic attribute, intercultural accommodation reaction, and e-commerce consequence. We propose that the extent of ethnic designs on a Web site may positively affect an online user’s attribution affects. This relationship however is contingent upon the strength of consumer ethnic identification. The attribution affects may further increase the personal attitude to Web site as well as the perception on Web site information quality, which jointly influence the individual’s intention to use the e-commerce Web site. This model is subject to empirical validation.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The first section presents a literature review of the key research issues, followed by the research model and propositions. We then lay out the proposed research method and discuss the paper’s limitations. Finally, we conclude with a discussion and future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A few streams of literature yield key insights regarding the ethnicity involving consumer e-commerce. In this section, we present an overview of these literatures and discuss how they contribute to the theoretical development of our research model.

Ethnic Group

Riggins defined ethnic groups as individuals who perceive themselves as members of a community that shares “the same culture, ancestry, language, history, religion, or customs” (Riggins 1992). Further, Conzen et al. recognized ethnicity as a dynamic process of “construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories” (Conzen, Gerber et al. 1992). The existing studies suggest that new immigrants as well as the generations of earlier immigrants are in active pursuit of their ethnic values which are embodied by cultural symbols and traditions (Holland and Gentry 1999).
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