Media Richness Theory and the Intention to Use Online Stores

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ABSTRACT

Although media richness theory has received considerable empirical support in explaining individual channel use and could provide important insights into the explanation of e-consumer behavior, no studies have validated this theory in explaining consumers’ intentions to use online stores. Therefore, the objective of this study was to empirically test media richness theory in explaining consumers’ intentions to use online stores in their purchase process. An online survey was carried out and data from 749 consumers was collected and analyzed using structural equation models. The results open up a new way of explaining consumers’ intentions to use online stores, as they provide empirical support for media richness theory in a commercial context and link it with the theory of planned behavior.

Keywords: Consumer Intentions, Electronic Commerce, Media Richness Theory, Online Store Use, Theory of Planned Behavior

INTRODUCTION

A number of studies done in the last few years have shown that a good understanding of consumer behavior on the Internet is essential if firms are to implement effective electronic commerce strategies and deploy functional consumer interfaces (Dellarocas, 2006; Hansen, 2008; Pitta, Franzak, & Fowler, 2006; Schibrowsky, Peltier, & Nill, 2007; Weinberg, Parise, & Guinan, 2007). Numerous studies have attempted to explain consumers’ decision to engage in online shopping or not to do so (Chang, Cheung, & Lai, 2005; Constantinides, 2004; Saeed, Hwang, & Yi, 2003; Zhou, Dai, & Zhang, 2007). Nevertheless, although several studies suggest that consumers’ behavior can be explained by media richness theory (Black, Lockett, Ennew, Winklhofer, & McKechnie, 2002; Korgaonkar, Silverblatt, & Girard, 2006; Pavlou & Fygenson, 2006), we have not found any research that tests this theory’s explanation of consumer behavior. Thus, this article presents the results of an empirical study designed to formulate and test a model to explain consumers’ intentions to use online stores to perform information searches and transactions while testing media richness theory in the context of business-to-consumer (B2C) relationships.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Media Richness Theory

Media richness theory suggests that the performance of individuals in a communication
context will be a function of the fit between the characteristics of the medium – media richness – and the characteristics of the task to be achieved – task analyzability (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Media richness refers to the medium’s ability to convey certain types of information and is determined by its capacity for immediate feedback, multiple cues and senses involved, language variety, and personalization (Lengel & Daft, 1988). Along these dimensions, media are ranked on a continuum describing their relative richness, from richest to leanest: face-to-face is the richest medium, followed by telephone, voice messaging, electronic mail and Websites (Rice, 1992). Task analyzability refers to the degree to which tasks involve the application of objective, well-understood procedures that do not require novel solutions. An analyzable task corresponds to a task with clear, precise, predetermined responses to potential problems; an unanalyzable task, on the other hand, requires individuals to think about, create, or find satisfactory solutions to problems outside the domain of facts, rules or procedures. As a result, in the context of B2C relationships, richer media such as face-to-face communication are more appropriate for unanalyzable tasks such as learning the basics of how to use a complex product, whereas leaner media such as Websites are more appropriate for analyzable tasks such as comparing the prices of the products sold by different retailers.

As Carlson and Zmud (1999) and King and Xia (1997) point out, media richness theory has been investigated in a number of studies. Generally, the results have supported the theory when it is tested on so-called traditional media, such as face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, letters, and memos. However, inconsistent empirical findings have resulted from the introduction of new media such as electronic mail and voice mail. These inconsistencies have encouraged a reconsideration of media richness theory. As a result, an extension of the theory has been formulated: channel expansion theory. Channel expansion theory suggests that past experiences influence how an individual develops richness perceptions for a given channel (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). The experience individuals have acquired allows them to develop knowledge bases that may be used to more effectively encode and decode rich messages on a channel. Thus, individuals with more experience with the channel and with the topic are able to participate more easily in rich communication via lean channels. In the context of our study, this means that the more experience a consumer has with online stores and with the product purchasing process (information search and transaction tasks), the more likely he or she is to perceive online stores as being rich media. No studies have empirically tested this assumption for the media richness perception of a Website. Thus, we formulated our first hypothesis:

**H1:** The consumer’s Web experience will positively influence the perceived media richness of a Web store.

Media richness theory has primarily been used to study intra-organizational communications. More specifically, it has been applied to study the use of media by workers (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987), teleworkers (Higa, Sheng, Shin, & Figueredo, 2000), virtual teams (Wijayanayake & Higa, 1999), and managers (Lengel & Daft, 1988; Markus, 1994). As well, the theory has been invoked in studying the use of electronic mail (Adria, 2000; Dawley & Anthony, 2003; Lee, 1994; Marginson, King, & McAulay, 2000; Markus, 1994), the use of multimedia (Lim, O’Connor & Remus, 2005), the execution of negotiation tasks (Purdy, Nye, & Balakrishnan, 2000), teamwork (Alge, Wiethoff, & Klein, 2003; Lowry & Nunamaker, 2003), workers’ performance (Mennecke, Valacich, & Wheeler, 2000; Suh, 1999), the quality of organizational communication (Byrne & Lemay, 2006; Cable & Yu, 2006), the transfer of knowledge (Hasty, Massey, & Brown, 2006), the accuracy of distance education programs (Shepherd & Martz; 2006), the quality of service (Froehle, 2006; Vickery, Droge, Stank, Goldsby, & Markland, 2004), and the impact of media on product development (Banker, Bardhan, & Asdemir,
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