Chapter 14

Effectiveness of Social Interactivity in Merchant Websites on Emotional and Behavioral Responses:
Study of the Anthropomorphic Virtual Agent and the Commercial Discussion Forum

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ABSTRACT

In a context of hyper connectivity, the designers of commercial websites are constantly seeking to generate favorable psychological states among internet users and to re-enchant them. This research aims to study the effect of the interaction between the social dimensions of interactivity on psychological states and the approach behavior of the e-consumer. Experimentation is chosen as the most appropriate method for testing the proposed model. An online experiment was conducted with 662 internet users. A merchant website was designed for the purposes of the study incorporating the interaction forms investigated. The results of this research underline the power of the social dimension of interactivity in the mediated market environments and show that a socially interactive site can generate the user's flow state, as well as a feeling of being physically present in a remote environment. This relation is moderated by the perceived risk.

INTRODUCTION

In a context of hyper-connectivity, the designers of commercial websites are constantly seeking to generate favorable psychological states among Internet users and to re-enchant them. To differentiate themselves from their competitors and gain market share, companies can create or strengthen their competitive advantages through innovation. To this end, innovation becomes crucial and a source of sustainability for any company to differentiate itself (Sahut and Leroux. 2011). Companies choose Information and communication technologies ICT according to their organizational characteristics and the objectives they want to achieve. Therefore, companies' success in adopting an ICT depends on their dynamic capacities and the type of technological innovation.

The development of electronic commerce has revolutionized user's consumption habits. In fact, shopping on merchant websites now offers Internet users the possibility of buying from any point of sale on a national or international scale, saving time and enjoying promotions. Shopping on merchant websites also allows users to easily search for the information they need through virtual platforms with ergonomic features that influence the sensory system of the cyber consumer. We are witnessing a change in the physical management of a store towards digital management. Human interaction is just as important as in media environments, making it possible to enrich visitors' experience by making it pleasant and warm.

A study of Internet users' behavior towards electronic commerce shows that Internet users are increasingly looking for social interaction in addition to their instrumental goals (Statista[1], 2019). Recent results from Forbes[2] (2018) suggest that by 2020, more than 80% of businesses should have some way to automate customer interactions. In addition, 38% of companies are deploying a virtual agent. Another recent study (Forbes, 2017) on Internet users' behavior towards electronic commerce suggests that 75% of Internet users prefer to interact with other site visitors.

The digital transformation in market environments presents a new challenge for companies operating online to better respond to the constant changes in consumption patterns. To improve the visitor's experience, the interactivity of merchant websites is a solution to act on the experience and perception of Internet users and therefore deserves a thorough investigation. A number of studies show that the technical dimension of interactivity materialized by the animation of images, color, music, etc. is capable of improving a visitor's online experience, but it does not alone produce the fiction that Internet users experience in natural interactions with a real person (Balbo, Jeannot, and Helme-Guizon, 2013; Blazevis et al. 2014; Jamy, 2015).

In addition, recent studies show the lack of human warmth and sociability often perceived by visitors of commercial Websites (Norouzi et al., 2019; Jaisie and Cosmin, 2020). This leads many consumers to be strongly reluctant to use the Internet as a transaction tool and consequently shopping at physical outlets where they feel more confident. As a result, the social dimension of interactivity is now an essential success factor (Viot and Bressolles, 2014; Jamy, 2015; Audénis et al. 2017).

In the COVID-19 pandemic context, the concept of social interactivity has taken on all its importance. In fact, lockdowns, physical distancing, and limitations of social life have deeply affected the psychological states of isolated people. In such difficult conditions where most transactions and sales are made virtually, people are increasingly searching for interaction on merchant websites that allow them a realistic user experience. Companies are so innovating with different virtual reality technologies to diversify ways of enhancing interactivity on their online merchant platforms (Schmidt et al., 2019; Norouzi et al., 2019; Jaisie and Cosmin, 2020).

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