"Like Talking To a Wall": a Study of Multinational Customers' Online Shopping Experiences

Brigid Appiah Otoo
University of North Carolina at Greensboro, baappiah@uncg.edu

Yalda Esmizadeh
University of North Carolina at Greensboro, y_esmiza@uncg.edu

Prashant Palvia
University of North Carolina at Greensboro, pcpalvia@uncg.edu

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Brigid Appiah Otoo
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
baappiah@uncg.edu

Yalda Ezmizadeh
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
y_esmiza@uncg.edu

Prashant Palvia
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
pcpalvia@uncg.edu

ABSTRACT

Using online reviews of multinational customers, we explored various attributes of their experiences when they engage in online shopping. Our analysis revealed eight key themes: interaction with customer service, paid subscription service experience, experience with e-retailers, delivery service experience, return policy experience, cost experience, product quality experience, and convenience in online shopping. We discuss these themes and how the experiences of customers in different regions compare based on their unique cultural factors and the level of economic development. The study contributes to our knowledge of online service experience and e-retail services.

KEYWORDS

Online Shopping Experience, multinational, Hofstede, global

INTRODUCTION

With the prolific growth in internet usage, online shopping is fast becoming very popular globally. E-retailers are exploring ways to create and preserve interaction opportunities with online customers to enhance their shopping experiences. Online shopping experience (OSE) occurs when a consumer interacts with an e-retailer's website and customer service personnel (Trevinal and Stenger 2014). Meyer and Schwager (2007) defined customer experience as "the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company" Pg.2. OSE has attracted significant academic research interest. However, little progress has been made beyond the traditional conceptualizations of the construct (Trevinal and Stenger 2014). Most existing research on online shopping is exploratory. The focus has been on identifying and validating key web-based service dimensions by providing a detailed list of attributes through conceptual and qualitative analysis. Also, prior literature has typically used data from limited geographical locations or products. Hence, these studies are not always generalizable to other contexts. We address this gap in the literature by exploring global perspectives of answers to the following questions:

1. From a global-retailing market perspective, what are the attributes of customer experience that arise when customers engage in online shopping?

2. How do the experiences of customers in different global regions compare?

Based on 8,288 reviews from multinational Amazon customers, we explore the OSE of typical web-based service factors such as pre- sale and after sale support and delivery (Otim and Grover, 2006). We identified 8 key themes from the reviews gathered. We observed that customers had mixed reviews about their overall OSE. Interaction with customer service was the predominant issue raised with both positive and negative reviews. For instance, one reviewer likened their interaction with Amazon customer service to be "Like talking to a wall". We also discuss the impact of global environmental factors such as cultural dimensions and the level of economic development on the observed OSE themes identified from various multinational customers. Thus, in this study, we advance online service experiential theory by contributing to existing literature about the attributes of customer experience that arise when customers engage in online shopping in different parts of the world. From a management perspective, understanding the key differences between markets will enable businesses to develop differential customer experience management strategies and identify the most important components of online customer experience.

The rest of our paper is organized as follows: first, a comprehensive literature review on OSE and its influencing factors in a global context are presented. We then outline our methodology as well as the analysis approach. This is followed by the results and discussion of our findings, and their implications for research and practice. Finally, we present limitations, directions for future research, and the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on OSE focus on identifying key factors for customers' motivation in selecting online retailers which lead to higher satisfaction and better OSE. Devaraj et al. (2002) found that perceived ease of use and usefulness have significant effect on customers' preference and experience quality. Website design, customer service, and pricing significantly improve the quality of online customer experience (Luo et al. 2012). Bilgihan (2016) identified ease of locating a web site, ease of use, perceived usefulness, hedonic and utilitarian features, perceived enjoyment, personalization, social interaction and multi-device combability as the antecedents of integrated OSE. On the other hand, product uncertainty and retailer visibility have been identified to have negative impact on customer experience. Furthermore, online support for the decision making process (i.e., intelligence, design, and choice) results in consumer's time and cost savings which have a direct impact on the quality of their experience (Kohli et al. 2004). Prior studies have identified physical, ideological, pragmatic, and social as the four major dimensions to conceptualize OSE (Trevinal and Stenger 2014). Researchers concluded that OSE is a complex experience which results from interactions between consumers, shopping practices and the online environment (e.g., shopping websites and online consumer reviews).

Otim and Grover (2006) identified three sets of factors in web-based service dimensions; pre-purchase, transaction-related, and post purchase services. Otim and Grover's (2006) described the pre-purchase stage online services to include site search features, information content, and ease of use/usability. During a customer's interaction with an e-retailer, their experience is affected by support for product search and evaluation as well as the website's aesthetics. Aesthetics refer to the website's attractiveness or overall look and design. During the transaction stage, a customer's interaction with the e-retailer involves providing customers with several delivery options for receiving their purchased items. It also involves the customer receiving and paying the bill for their desired items. The experience of the customer at this stage of their online interaction will depend on the speed of delivery options as well as the transparency of billing. The customer's interaction with the e-retail website at the post-purchase service stage involves the ability to track and receive their purchased items. It also involves access to after sales support. Since e-retailers cannot offer customers physical contact with products, order tracking to check the delivery status is particularly important. Research suggests that customers value on-time delivery (Yang et al. 2003).

To effectively study OSE from a global perspective, we consider country specific factors which can influence customers' expectations and perceptions of retail services they seek. The level of economic development of a country can be categorized into under-developed, developing, newly industrialized and advanced (Palvia et al. 2002). Research suggests that differences in the level of economic development can significantly impact the behavior of online shopping customers (Lim et al. 2016). Individuals may evaluate the value for their money differently depending on their level of access to income. Also, an advanced economy will give consumers more options to choose from and will compete for customers' business through strategic means. Also, an individual's level of knowledge about their right as a customer could vary based on the economic development of the country. In this study, a country's gross domestic product (GDP) is used as a surrogate broad measure for economic development.

Issues stemming from political and governance issues in a country can both directly and indirectly affect various IT related areas. These issues include, transborder data flow restrictions, governmental technology initiatives, privatization trends, enactment and enforcement of standards, technology investments tariffs, and trade and customs regulations. These political/regulatory practices can also have a significant impact on IT and IS implementation hence a direct impact on the level of economic development in the country and its citizens (Palvia et al. 2002). Cultural differences, which are usually characterized by country, can have a direct effect on OSE (Stafford et al. 2004). Culture can be defined as a shared set of values which affects societal perceptions, preferences, attitudes, and responses. Hofstede(1984) classified cultural differences in five dimensions: power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. Prior studies have used masculinity-femininity and individualism-collectivism to predict customers' online shopping behavior (Zhou et al. 2007). Individualism-collectivism dimension cause a significant difference in online shopping behavior of western and eastern cultures (Zheng et al. 2012). In this study, we use the scores of Hofstede's cultural dimensions to investigate the cultural effects on OSE.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted a netnographic research method to collect and analyze experiential reviews of online shopping customers in various parts of the world. Netnography is defined as a "written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from on-line communications, where both the field work and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology" (Kozinets 1998, p.366). This method is well-known and useful in identifying hidden rich and often presupposed experiential attributes. Amazon company was adopted as the proxy e-retailer for our study. Amazon is an American electronic commerce and cloud computing company based in Seattle, Washington. It is a tech giant which is the largest internet retailer in the world as measured by revenue and market capitalization. Amazon boasts of a global presence with separate online retail storefronts located around the world. These localized storefronts are differentiated by top-level domain and country code where customers are offered different product selections and prices often in local currency.   To answer our research questions, it was important to collect data about customers' reviews of the various storefronts (Amazon in our case) instead of product reviews. Following Kozinets' (2002), appropriate social media (Facebook and Twitter) and commercial (Sitejabber and Trustpilot) websites were identified for the study.

Out of the initial 9,024 customer reviews of Amazon storefronts, 8,288 were selected based on countries with at least 30 reviews in English. These comprised of reviews from Canada (142), UK (345), USA (7528), Spain (82), France (102), Japan (52) and India (37). All the qualified reviews were numbered for coding and grouping. The inclusion of a review was based on its experiential attributes. To verify this assumption, we conducted analysis with Atlas.ti (a qualitative analysis software) using review data of amazon.com (the parent company) and identified contextual words with the highest frequency of appearance. These highlighted amazon, prime, shipping, customer and service to be most prevalent words. Since the most recurrent words are relevant for the type of content we were looking for, we carried out further analyses with the data collected. By using voyant-tools.com, an online qualitative analysis software, we identified the most recurrent two-word phrases in the dataset. We then identified codes in the customer reviews about OSE through open coding (Bryman 2016). The software enabled us to efficiently review the large set of reviews. By reading and re-reading the reviews of the 100 most recurrent phrases, we identified 44 codes which were most suitable to label and organize our data.

Using these codes, we undertook an initial analysis to identify the key themes from the Amazon.com data. This was done by indexing, which was undertaken through constant comparison within and between cases (Bryman 2016). Themes can be described as the major concepts which portray specific experiences of individual subjects and provide more general insights (Ryan and Bernard 2003). We further explored the extent to which the identified themes were represented in the reviews of the other storefronts.

FINDINGS

We present below findings from our thematic analysis, prior to reflecting on these findings in the discussion section.

Theme 1: Interaction with quality customer service

The most recurrent theme related to the viewpoints of customers on their interaction with customer support service. These interactions, though possible at all the stages of online shopping, were mostly observed at the after sales stage. The reviews were highly polarized whereby most customers had very positive experiences. The positive reviews stressed how customer focused was the service. While there were many such positive reviews, others expressed their frustration with accessing customer services. These issues included communication barriers especially with outsourced service personnel, ability to resolve issues with e-retailer's third-party vendors and accessibility to working phone or email contacts for the service.

Theme 2: Paid subscription service experience

For customers paying for periodic subscription service from e-retailers, the gap between their expectations and perceived quality of service was a major theme in the reviews. For Amazon, their subscription service 'Amazon Prime' offer benefits like free two-day shipping, access to entertainment (e.g., movies, tv channels, books) and product variety for a monthly fee. The reviews suggest that, most customers were happy with the value they got for their subscription services. Other reviews showed customers frustration with their paid subscription services. Predominant among such sentiments was inefficiencies in the 'free' shipping of products as well as issues with wrongful charges from customers' accounts. Also insightful was the perception that, as the customer base of e-retailers grow, the quality of their services tends to deteriorate.

Theme 3: Choosing among e-retailers and competitors

As the online shopping industry gets more competitive, choosing one e-retailer over another is largely influenced by customers' overall experience with a particular vendor. This means that a customer's interaction with all dimensions of the online service contribute to the intention to patronize a particular business. Likewise, for a particular e-retailer being chosen among competitive vendors indicates the superior quality of a customer's experience with it. Reviews about customers' choice among e-retailers was a recurring theme among the reviews analyzed.

Theme 4: Delivery service experience

At the after sales stage, customers place a lot of emphasis on the quality of service received. We found that reliability and speed were two performance attributes customers based their experience on. The high frequency of reviews associated with delivery services, suggests that, it is an important theme when designing online shopping services. From our dataset, the experiences were polarized. On one hand, some customers found their delivery service experience to either exceed or meet their expectations. Other customers had negative experiences with the quality of delivery service received especially when their expected delivery duration (e.g. expected two-day) was exceeded.

Theme 5: Return policy experience

To mitigate issues of trust stemming from the lack of physical interaction during online shopping, e-retailers design flexible return policies to encourage the patronage of their online services. This service is experienced at the after sales stage. Despite the intended ease of accessing such services, it is sometimes challenging for customers to return products they find unsatisfactory. Our findings suggest that most customers value easy return policy services which do not penalize them in shipping costs. On certain rare occasions, customers have had to incur costs they found unfair while returning products they purchased online. Others' frustration with accessing return policy services was lack of helpful guidance from e-retailers on how to go about it.

Theme 6: Cost experience

Online customers typically expect value for their money. This value must be realized in both the products they buy and services they receive (Banker and Byzalov 2014). A recurrent theme in the reviews was about the cost experience of online customers. The interaction involving cost occur at the transaction and after sale stages. At the transaction stage, customers are presented delivery options to choose from (at various prices) and billed at the end of the order. Likewise, should a customer have to return goods, they may in some instances have to pay for the reverse logistics. From our dataset, most customers found online shopping to be cost saving. While most reviews indicated that customers were happy with the cost of shopping online, some customers were not so happy with their own experience.

Theme 7: Product quality experience

In the retail industry, the perceived quality of both services and products impact the quality of customers' experience and satisfaction (Bei and Chiao 2001). Based on our analysis, we observed that customers' online experience was significantly affected by the quality of products they received. When the quality of products met or exceeded their expectations, customers gave favorable reviews for their experience. Other customers, however, did not have such positive experiences. Some of the issues with products included damaged items, differences between items received and the specifications described on the website as well as receiving wrong items. Customers frustration with such issues were exacerbated by the difficulty to return items and unsatisfactory after sales support.

Theme 8: Convenience in online shopping

We identified a significant proportion of the reviews which described enhanced convenience offered by the retailer. First, there was convenience of shopping at any preferred location through the internet without physically going to a specific shop. Second, there was the ability to find a very wide range of products and purchase from one single location, e.g., health, food, clothing, auto etc. The experiences described in the reviews resulted from customers interaction at all stages of the online shopping encounter. Viewpoints expressing this theme were polarized. Some customers loved the concept of convenient online shopping. While most of such reviews under this theme were positive, others were not so happy with using electronic retail rather than physical shops.

Experience by countries

To answer our second research question, we compared reviews for the various storefronts through further content analysis. Krippendorf (1980) defines content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid references from data to their contexts". P.113. This analysis was carried out based on the frequency of codes in the

reviews. This was based on the knowledge that the importance of an idea is revealed in the frequency with which it appears in the text (Myers 1997). A summary of the proportion of reviews expressing the eight key themes is detailed in Table 3. Our findings suggest that, the level of importance of the various themes varied according to the country of the storefront reviewed. "Interaction with customer service" was a predominant theme across all countries studied, whereby France and UK, had the highest percentages. The percentage of reviews associated with customers' experience with "Convenience in online shopping" was also a predominant theme across the different storefronts. The theme least reviewed, hence we consider least important among the 8 recurrent themes, was that on "Return policy experience". Compared to the other themes, Spain, France and Japan had negligible (≈ 0%) importance attached to this. US recorded the biggest relative frequency (3%) on this theme.

	Themes	US (5322)	Ca (283)	UK (648)	Es (89)	Fr (129)	Jp (52)	In (37)
1	Interaction with customer service	22%	35%	48%	34%	57%	27%	28%
2	Paid subscription service experience	23%	27%	26%	27%	5%	0%	0%
3	Experience with e-retailers	4%	2%	1%	2%	2%	0%	10%
4	Delivery service experience	8%	6%	5%	0%	14%	27%	45%
5	Return policy experience	3%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
6	Cost experience	6%	3%	3%	7%	0%	0%	0%
7	Product quality experience	6%	5%	4%	0%	13%	8%	4%
8	Convenience in online shopping	27%	20%	13%	30%	9%	38%	13%

Table 1. Summary of relative frequency of codes by country

DISCUSSION

In this section, we discuss our findings and attempt to explain the impact of country specific factors on customer experiences. Based on Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions, we discuss the impact of culture. Likewise, we discuss the effect of economic development based on the GDP of the country which serves as its surrogate broad measure. It was observed that, the convenience of online shopping, quality of paid subscription service and customer service interaction were the highest frequency OSE themes for the U.S., which has the highest economic development with a GDP of 19.39 trillion USD. This could be due to the availability of IT infrastructure making the internet widely available to its citizens. They therefore have ability to spend a lot of time on the internet for their shopping needs instead of going out into the community. It could also be due to the busy lifestyle of people living in more developed economies. The convenience of online shopping was therefore of great value to them. However, India which is significantly lower in economic development assigned delivery service experience as the most important theme. This is likely due to inefficient transportation and postal addressing system which may result in delivery challenges.

Comparing the experience by country by cultural dimensions provides some interesting insights. Some observations are made here. First, a masculine culture will value efficiency in services delivered and time management compared to a more feminine culture which is likely to value softer skills like good manners and friendliness. This is evidenced in Japan which scores highly as a masculine culture; hence the convenience of shopping at home impacts their online shopping significantly (38%) as well as the efficiency of after sales product delivery. Having a relatively feminine culture, countries like Spain and France reviewed customer service as the most important part of their experience. This could be due to the value placed on good manners and expected human skills and communication from customer service support.

The effects of the individualism/collectivism dimension are interesting. Individualist countries place a lot of value on their paid subscription service perhaps due to the added benefits of indoor entertainment as opposed to going out to socialize with the rest of the community. For Japan, which scores low on individualism, the paid subscription service was not a big part of their OSE. This is probably due to their need to build community instead of spending a long time indoors with television and other forms of entertainment available on Prime. Cultures with high risk avoidance will also value fast order shipping. This is true for France and Japan who had the highest relative frequency for fast order delivery and score highly on risk avoidance. Also, France and Japan place high emphasis on the quality of products received. This is again reflective of their risk avoidance whereby they expect nothing to go wrong with their products.

CONCLUSION

Using online reviews about Amazon, we have successfully explored the various attributes of customer experience which arise when customers engage in online shopping. Our analysis of the data collected revealed eight key themes. These themes reflected how the experiences of customers in different regions compare based on their unique cultural factors and their level of economic development. The study contributes to our knowledge of online service experience and its related theories by highlighting the influential cultural factors of different countries. Furthermore, through an understanding of the key differences among countries and how they relate to OSE, e-retailers can develop useful strategies to compete in the global marketplace. In this study, we could not ensure content validity since the collected data was scraped from the internet. Future studies may use survey data which is likely to be more valid. Also, due to changes in Facebook websites policies, we were not able to collect reviews from this prime source.

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