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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE INFLUENCES OF WEBSITE QUALITY ON ACTUAL PURCHASE AND MODERATION EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

In the context of e-tailing, website quality serves as a portal that affords informational cues of the product and services offered. Many scholars proved that more than a satisfactory website quality is one of the critical aspects for the success of the e-tailer as well as achieving customer's purchase intention. However, moderating effects of perceived risk and price tolerance on the relationship between website quality and purchase intention has not been examined. Furthermore, relationships between actual purchase and purchase intention have been relatively uncovered. Drawing from literature, we propose a research model to investigate interrelationships among website quality, purchase intention, actual purchase, perceived risk, and price tolerance. Conducting this research would contribute to our understanding of the moderator influence on the relation between website quality and purchase intention in the e-tailing environment and how this relationship leads to actual purchase behaviors.

Keywords

Website quality, perceived risk, price tolerance, initial/continued purchase intention, actual purchase.

INTRODUCTION

Online retailers (e-tailers) rely on the website for providing location-free, customer-controlled, and information-rich retail services (Taylor, Pentina, and Amialchuk 2011). Pew Research Center survey indicates that, in 2016, 79% of Americans have made an online purchase in comparison to 22% reported in the year 2000 (Smith and Anderson 2016). The Statistics Portal shows that e-tailers revenue for 2018 is 375 billion US dollars compared to 105 billion in 2005 (Statista 2018). PipeCandy e-commerce market research indicates that there are more than 1.3 million e-tailers in the US; however, only 245,000 of them reported web sales (Murthy 2017). Thus, there seems to be continued exploitive growth in online shoppers and e-tailers; however, the majority of the e-tailers have not been successful in generating revenue through their websites. Many researchers have studied various relationships of website quality and purchase intention to gain a better understanding of consumer online shopping behaviors. We argue for comprehensively studying the moderating effects on the relationship between these variables and actual consumer purchasing behaviors.

Previous studies have indicated that relative to physical stores, consumers still perceive higher risk in online shopping (Mohd Sam and Tahir 2009). Research has further stated that the majority of consumers use websites to obtain product-related information, but they are still inclined to do their purchasing at physical stores or known e-tailer, due to the risks posed by online shopping (e.g., financial risk, product risk, psychological risk, and time risk) (Masoud 2013). This finding shows that consumers do not reject the idea of online shopping, but they may be hesitant to conduct transactions with a new e-tailer when they perceive risks.

DeLone and McLean (2004) study show that website's system quality, information quality, and service quality are the prerequisites of the success of an e-tailer. These website quality variables are known to have a direct influence on consumer willingness to make a purchase using e-commerce systems and enhance their shopping experience. e-Tailers can increase their net benefits by attracting new customers as well as by retaining consumers to purchase more products using their websites. Another study has shown that the perception of decreased risk can increase the amount spent in online stores and the frequency of making online purchases (Swaid and Wigand 2009). Price tolerance could be another factor that can affect customer's willingness to make a purchase (He, Chan, and Tse 2008). Thus, existing literature has demonstrated website quality, perceived risk, and price tolerance directly affect the purchase intention of a consumer. However, very few studies have gone beyond purchase intention and investigated the actual consumer purchase behaviors.

In this research in progress paper, we argue that perceived risk and price tolerance variables moderate the relationship between website quality and purchase intention as well as the relationship between purchase intention and actual purchase. We know that to achieve a competitive advantage, an e-tailer must focus on building a higher quality website to influence the consumer's purchase intention. However, we do not know about the relationship between purchase intention and the actual purchase. We also lack reliable empirical studies on the effects of interaction between website quality and purchase intention on the consumer's perceived risk and price tolerance. A similar argument can also be made for interaction between purchase intention

and actual purchase. For this reason, we have developed a research model to investigate the moderating role of perceived risk and price tolerance in the context of e-tailer website quality and consumer purchase behavior.

RESEARCH MODEL

In this paper, we present a research model developed based on the existing literature that can inform investigations into the interrelationships among the constructs- website quality, perceived risk, price tolerance, purchase intentions, and actual purchase-from the context of e-tailing, as shown in Figure 1.

Hypotheses	H1a	H1b	H1c	H2a	H2b	H2c	H3	H4	H5a	H5b	H5c	H6a	H6b	H6c	H7a	H7b	H8a	H8b	H8c	H9a	H9b	H9c	H10a	H10b
Information Quality																								
Service Quality																								
System Quality																								
Initial Purchase Intention																								
Continued Purchase Intention																								
Actual Purchase																								
Perceived Risk																								
Price Tolerance																								

Legend: Shades indicate relationships between constructs for the hypothesis.

Figure 1. Research model

Relationships between Website Quality and Purchase Intentions

Website Quality

Website quality is characterized by the ability to allow users to fulfill their goals and willingness of users to revisit the site to perform the same on an ongoing basis (Loiacono, Watson, and Goodhue 2007). Website quality affects the credibility and reliability of a business, which in turn is directly associated with a customers’ intention to purchase via the website (Bai, Law, and Wen 2008). Various researchers, studying the effect of website quality characteristics on user perceptions, have observed that website quality can impact purchase intention considerably in the e-commerce shopping context (Fung and Lee 1999). Since the website is an essential user interface for Internet-enabled business, it is vital to evaluate website quality properties and what customers would need from the website (Straub and Watson 2001). In the context of e-commerce systems, several researchers (H. H. Chang and Chen 2008; C. Hsu, Chang, and Chen 2012; J. Kim and Lennon 2013; Lin 2007) have addressed and recognized website quality features in a variety of forms. While researchers may state similar features in different ways, there is a broader consensus that website quality should be assessed from three dimensions-system, information, and service.

System quality: Kirakowski, Claridge, and Whitehand (1998) defined perceived system quality as the extent to which the client thinks the website is easy, reliable, accessible, and adaptable and the interface interaction is consistent. Poor system characteristics such as lack of responsiveness, usefulness, and suitability discourages the customer from utilizing an e-tailer website and decline the sales and demand. Besides, security becomes an essential issue in the system quality as well, because all business transactions are conducted in the site (DeLone and McLean 2004).

Service quality: measures reactive, cooperative, and efficiency aspects of the website (Palmer 2002). Zeithaml (2002) clarified that to expand the purchase intention rate, establish online loyalty, and guarantee that buyers get satisfying, e-tailers must move their focus from the aspect of exchanges and transactions to the aspect of customer service over the web. Service quality indicates overall customer assessments and judgments about the service provided by the site (Palmer 2002).

Information quality: Rai, Lang, and Welker (2002) illustrated it as a degree of perceived value about the output provided from the website. The information contained in the website has to be accurate, relevant, personalized, formatted and easy to understand to encourage customer’s initial purchase intention as well as return back on a regular basis. Information quality of an e-tailer website is judged by enjoyable shopping experience provided to the customer and providing necessary information about the product or services so that customers can make their ideal purchasing decisions (Ahn, Kim, Choi, and Cho 2004). Thus, information quality of e-tailing websites has an extensive effect on the purchase intention.

Purchase Intentions

Website quality is a crucial component in electronic business because the customer’s perceptions of website positively impact intentions to use a site and purchase from a site (H. H. Chang and Chen 2008). The real challenge for the e-tailers is converting the website visitors into buyers when they view the website for the first time. According to (Chen and Barnes 2007), purchase

intention is characterized as a circumstance when a consumer is willing and intends to take part in online transactions. There are two kinds of purchase intentions when it comes to e-tailing: the intention of initial purchase and intention of continued purchase, and they are intimately correlated to the customer conversion and customer retention (D. Gefen, E. Karahanna, and D. W. Straub 2003). Customer conversion is characterized when the website can convert prospective users into buyers, while customer retention refers to the extent to which the website can engage existing buyers of the website to purchase again (Ittner and Larcker 1998; Reichheld and Scheffer 2000). In this way, e-tailers need strategic focus and innovative techniques in term of website quality to increase their limited resources either by improving and expanding user conversion rate or retention rate.

Hypotheses

Because enhanced website quality leads to trusting the business and retention of existing customers, many researchers have investigated the impact of website quality on customers' purchase intentions. For instance, Hsu, Chang & Chen (2012) suggested five quality factors among them information quality, system quality, service quality, customer perceived flow, and perceived playfulness using a conceptual framework of stimulus, organism, and response. Their study results indicated that the e-service quality features directly influenced customer choices and purchase intentions. In another similar study (K. Chang, Kuo, Hsu, and Cheng 2014) tried to explore the influence of website quality, perceived trust on customer purchase intention. They analyzed the impact of website brand and perceived value on the customer purchase intention on the hotel sectors and results indicated that website brand increased hotel purchases and orders. In other studies, research is based on performances and operational features. In one such investigation, Chang & Chen (2008) analyzed the impact of customer interface quality, satisfaction, and switching costs. In this case, the researchers examined customization features, interactivity, character, and conveniences of the websites. Moreover, interaction facilities, speed, and personalized interface are critical to attracting traffic and switching costs. Further, it was established that switching costs were the main factors for e-loyalty, i.e., customer favors the e-tailer over a competitor and has recurring purchasing behaviors. Loyalty on e-commerce platforms was considered profitable since loyal users provide more repeat business opportunities for businesses. Kuan, Bock & Vathanophas (2008) compared the effects of website quality on initial customer purchase and continued purchase at various e-commerce platforms. Their research results indicate that system quality increases customer conversion and service quality increases customer retention. Thus, we find that literature is reporting the different website quality aspects has different effects on the purchase intention constructs (initial and continued intentions). Therefore, further research is a need to have a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach that focuses on a variety of quality dimensions (He, Chan, and Tse 2008; Liang and Chen 2009). We hypothesize that each website quality constructs have a positive impact on initial as well as continued purchase intentions.

H1a, b, c: System (a) | information (b) | service (c) quality has a significant positive influence on initial purchase intention on e-tailing websites

H2a, b, c: System (a) | information (b) | service (c) quality has a significant positive influence on continued purchase intention on e-tailing websites

Relationships between Purchase Intentions and Actual Purchase

Among information systems researchers, purchase intention has been established as a proxy parameter for an actual purchasing decision. However, consumer researchers have argued that survey subjects have a difference in attitude when responding to hypothetical questions in comparison to actual purchasing behavior (Desaint and Varbanova 2013). Subject's response to the initial and continued purchase intention questions may not be consistent with their actual purchasing behavior when they were not asked to pay for their choices (Takahashi, Todo, and Funaki 2018). While the purchase intention can be a valid measure of the willingness or the desire of the customer to buy a particular product or service, it might not reflect actual consumer behavior in real life. Thus, it is necessary to explore the relationship between perceived purchase intention and actual consumer purchase activity. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H3: Initial purchase intention has a positive impact on the actual purchase behavior of a product or service.

H4: Continued purchase intention has a positive impact on the actual purchase behavior of a product or service.

Moderator Effects on Relationships between Website Quality and Purchase Intentions

Perceived Risk

Perceived risk reflects the customer's perspective, and it refers to the uncertainty and adverse consequences in an online transaction (J. Kim and Lennon 2013). It is the tendency of bearing the risk when users participate online. Thus, in the online shopping context, the probability and the result of each purchase event are indeterminate. Moreover, when customers have a terrible experience or dissatisfied with a transaction, customer satisfaction service recovery may not be able to convince customers to return, because failed experience motivates additional perceived risks for the customer (Holloway, Wang, and

Parish 2005). Masoud (2013) analyzed the effects of perceived risks on online shopping setting in Jordan using focus group interviews with online shoppers. The results indicate that dimensions of perceived risks such as financial risks, products risks, delivery risks, information security risks, and time risks directly influence online shopping. Researchers have stated the direct impact of website quality on customer's purchase intentions and have also noted that perceived risk can have a direct negative effect on e-loyalty (Hsieh and Tsao 2014). Thus, it is probable that the connection between website quality and purchase intentions as well as between purchase intentions and actual purchase is moderated by perceived risk. Towards that, we hypothesize that when the customer perceives higher risk, it weakens the relationship between website quality and purchase intention constructs. This study will focus on the perceived risk dimensions known to affect online shopping (Masoud 2013).

H5a, b, c: The relationship between system (a) | information (b) | service (c) and initial purchase intention is weaker when customers perceive higher risk levels

H6a, b, c: The relationship between system (a) | information (b) | service (c) and continued purchase intention is weaker when customers perceive higher risk levels

H7: The relationship between initial/continued purchase intentions, and actual purchasing behavior is weaker when the customer perceives risk.

Price Tolerance

Price tolerance refers to the degree to which customers would be willing to pay to prevent a change in purchasing behavior (Herrmann, Huber, Sivakumar, and Wricke 2004). Price tolerance construct has been studied in equivalent terms such as price thresholds, price response, and price expectations-with price thresholds being the most popular one for studying customer's price sensitivity influence on purchase intention (He, Chan, and Tse 2008). Studies have also demonstrated the influence of price tolerance on customers perception of value which is a reflection of website quality (M. Hsu, Chang, and Chuang 2015; H. Kim, Chan, and Gupta 2007; Vázquez-Casielles, Suárez-Álvarez, and Del Río-Lanza 2009). In this regard, online business should refer to some appropriate price latitude when contemplating price strategy to stimulate the purchase intention, customer retention, and to acquire a competitive advantage. Even though researchers have identified the price tolerance and customer satisfaction as a major driving factor for repurchase intention (He, Chan, and Tse 2008), price tolerance functions as a moderator on the relationship between website quality and initial/continued purchase intention in the online shopping context has not been covered yet. Similarly, price tolerance moderator impacts the relationship between purchase intentions and actual purchase also have not been explored. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following

H8a, b, c: The relationship between system (a) | information (b) | service (c) and initial purchase intention is stronger when customers have higher price tolerance

H9a, b, c: The relationship between system (a) | information (b) | service (c) and continued purchase intention is stronger when customers have higher price tolerance

H10a, b: The relationship between initial (a) /continued (b) purchase intentions, and actual purchasing behavior is stronger when customer have higher price tolerance.

RESEARCH METHOD

To test the hypotheses, we will be adopting a mixed method approach, i.e., survey and interviews methodologies. This research will be conducted in four phases. The first phase will involve the development of fictional e-tailing websites, survey instrument, and interview protocol. Tasks for the experiment will include browsing an online product catalog and placing an order for a product. The experiment will be designed as a one-factorial study with three independent groups. We will be developing three versions of a fictional e-Tailing website manipulating different levels of website quality. The websites will vary in low, medium, and high levels of information, service, and system quality characteristics. Creation of three different website versions will ensure there are sufficient variations in participants' perception of website quality as well as perceived risk and price tolerance. For this study, we will be creating a gift cards shopping site. Participants will be instructed to purchase a gift card for their friends and family members. Participants will be asked to browse the site and add gift cards they would like to buy to the shopping cart and click the place order button. Upon selection of the place order option, participants will be provided a choice to make an actual purchase of the gift cards in the shopping cart using their credit card. If participants opt to purchase the gift cards, the online transaction for the purchase will be processed using PayPal. Regardless of whether participants make an actual purchase, they will be asked to complete an online questionnaire based on their shopping experience. Survey items will be adopted from relevant sources - system quality (C. Hsu, Chang, and Chen 2012), information quality (C. Hsu, Chang, and Chen 2012), service quality (C. Hsu, Chang, and Chen 2012; Liang and Chen 2009; Lin 2007), perceived risk (J. Kim and Lennon 2013; Masoud 2013), price tolerance (Vázquez-Casielles, Suárez-Álvarez, and Del Río-Lanza 2009), initial purchase intention (J. Kim and Lennon 2013), continued purchase intention (Shen 2012), and actual purchase (Wee et al. 2014). In the second

phase, we will be employing a Delphi method to ensure the wording used in the instrument and task instructions are clear, concise, and comprehensible. We will conduct a pilot test to identify any potential technical errors that could impede data collection. For the study data collection, we will be recruiting participants for the survey study by advertising the study participation details in the social networking sites. After the participants complete their shopping tasks and online questionnaire, they will be presented with options to schedule their virtual interview with researchers. In the third phase, participants will be interviewed using semi-structured and open-ended questions to gather more information on their decisions on whether or not to make an actual purchase. Participants who made an actual purchase, as well as those who didn't, will be interviewed. In the fourth phase, survey data will be analyzed using multiple regression analysis to test the hypotheses. Interview data will be analyzed using the content analysis technique to identify factors that influence and lead the participants to make or not to make actual purchase decisions. The research model will be updated based on the results of the mixed methods study.

CONCLUSION

With increased use of technology and online shopping, many researchers have tried to understand the effects of website quality on customer satisfaction and the success of e-tailers. According to literature, the varied dimensions of website (service, information, and system) quality define consumers' perception of the e-tailer and intention to engage in an online transaction. However, we do not have empirical evidence on how website quality leads to intention which in turn impacts the actual customer purchasing decision. Despite the existence of numerous studies on website quality and intent to purchase using e-commerce platforms, researchers have not given conclusive findings on the relationship between website quality, purchase intention, and actual purchase behaviors. Along with the primary relationships, we will study moderator effects of perceived risks and price tolerance on the relationships between quality and intention as well as between intention and actual purchase. Predominant of the researchers have used purchase intention as a proxy for actual purchase and conducted their research using survey method. Collecting data on actual purchasing behavior in a controlled setting in itself presents a greater challenge. We plan to study the actual purchase behavior using a mixed method approach using survey and interview data collection techniques. Study participants will browse a gift cards shopping site and will be given an option to make an online transaction to purchase the cards added to the cart. Subsequently, during the interviews, their decision on whether or not to make the actual purchase will be investigated. This research study will contribute to our understanding of how website quality affects online shopping experience and impacts consumer purchasing behavior.

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