

Exploring the Role of Personnel Service Importance in Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT

The aims of this study have two fold. First, to explore the effects of different designed websites on creating customers' experiential values. Secondly, to investigate the moderating of the importance of personnel service in the relationship between the virtual experience that create by e-retailers and the consumers' experiential values. The results supported the proposed hypotheses. Conclusions and practical implications are provided.

Keywords: Elaboration Likelihood Model, personnel service, virtual experience, experiential value

INTRODUCTION

Owing to the speedy expanding of digital activities, people spent more time on cyber-activities. Lately many e-retailers adopt "experiential marketing" to win customer's experience and create superior value. The difference between physical and virtual environments is the existence of personnel service. Service people is a critical determinant in servicescapes, as well as in virtual environments. Some e-retailers use avatars to simulate the condition in the real world [3]. The aims of this study have two fold. First, to explore the effects of different designed websites on creating customers' experiential values. Secondly, to investigate the moderating of the importance of personnel service in the relationship between the virtual experience that create by e-retailers and the consumers' experiential values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Klein has proposed that consumers may experience a product for the first time via website [6]. Using Steuer's [10] concept of telepresence, Klein called this a 'virtual experience.' If the virtual experience advances, the convincing ability of advertisement will increase [6]. Pine and Gilmore proposed a model of two dimensions to describe the characteristics of experiences [9]. The first dimension is customer participation, which is called active or passive. The second dimension is connection or environment relationship, which is called vividness. Thus, four kinds of virtual experience are created.

Entertainment: The consumer uses observation only (passive) to absorb peripheral entertainment information provided by the seller, for example, watching TV or attending a concert. **Education:** The consumer takes in product information (absorption) provided by the seller and, in so doing, participates

directly (active) in the activity, for example, attending a class. **Escapism:** The consumer is completely immersed in all information supplied by the seller and thus partakes directly in the activity, just like the role of co-production. **Estheticism:** The consumer, through observation, is attracted to content provided by the seller but does not take part directly in the activity, for example, like a visitor to an art gallery only has little or no effect on it. Therefore, the e-retailer can design the websites according to the four types of virtual experience.

Holbrook and Hirschman believed that the value of consuming behavior of customers is not in the purchasing of the product or service, but in its direct relation with the derivative of the consuming experience [5]. Thus, we argue that the consumer experience consists of numerous types of value.

Experiential value perception included the direct user experience or distance appreciation of goods and services [1]. Seven dimensions of experiential values, visual appeal, entertainment, escapism, enjoyment, efficiency, economic value, and Service excellence, were proposed by Mathwick, Malhotra, and Rigdon [7]. When a consumer participates in different virtual experiences, the difference between his/her active (education and escapism) and passive (estheticism and peripheral entertainment) participation may have customer value [4]. Thus, virtual experiences designed by e-retailer can increase consumers' experiential values (**H1**).

In a high-interaction service industry, consumers must be relatively highly involved and must be sufficiently prepared in advance of making the purchase. When consumer perceived importance of personnel service is high, the consumer takes the personnel service and interaction seriously, but the value of the virtual experience is relatively low. Therefore, the virtual experience may be more persuasive for the consumer if it occurs peripherally. Pine and Gilmore argued that estheticism could attract consumers with art and then transmit the aesthetic value [9]. The aesthetic experience is produced by self-guidance, intrinsic and passive consuming experience [4]. In contrast, in the peripheral entertainment experience, the consumer observes and absorbs peripheral information that is provided by the seller. The consumer does not participate in the activity directly; peripheral entertainment experience is one kind of external feeling that is passive to be absorbed by consumers [9]. Based on the above analyses, we can regard estheticism and peripheral experience as peripheral hints. Thus, when the consumer perceived importance of personnel service is high, estheticism and the entertainment experience will increase the experiential value (**H2**).

When consumer perceived importance of personnel service is low, the assistance from others is not the key concern. In this way, consumers will actively interact with the website. According to Elaboration Likelihood Model [8], escapism and education experience are the central routes that have better convincing effects. Hence, the higher the escapism and education experience, the higher the experiential value. But the estheticism and the peripheral experiences do not have a conspicuous influence. Thus, when the consumer perceived importance of personnel service is low, escapism and education will increase experiential value (**H3**). The research framework is provided in Figure 1.

METHODS

An experimental approach is adopted in this study. The goal of designed website is to provide users with a feeling as close as possible to direct product experience. We choose the fictitious name to eliminate any kind of affinity or bias people may have toward a familiar brand name. Vividness (high and low) and active/passive are the two factors to design the four websites of virtual experience, estheticism (high vividness X active), education (low vividness X passive), escapism (high vividness X passive), peripheral entertainment (low vividness X active), and the control group (no special experience). A total of 161 college students were randomly assigned to five types of virtual experience and one control condition. Consequently, the analysis included 161 valid questionnaires, a 92% return rate. Respondents were asked to visit a website, which is an advertisement of laptop via computer in a laboratory.

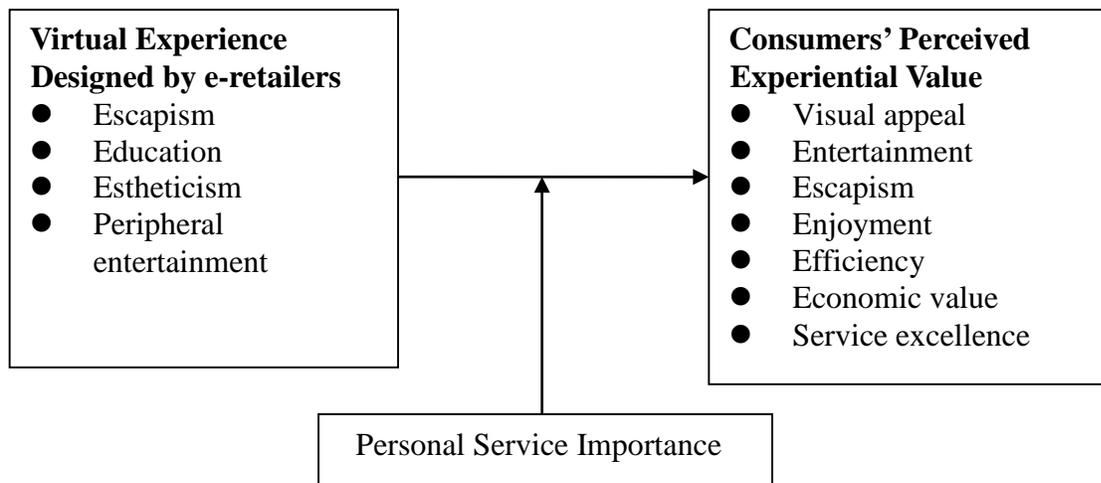


Figure 1 Research Model

RESULTS

The results showed that virtual experience designed by e-retailer can improve consumers' experiential values. Moreover, perceived importance of personnel service is the moderator of the relationship between e-retailers created virtual experience and consumers' experiential values. Therefore, H1, H2, and H3 are supported.

CONCLUSIONS

When consumers perceived importance of personnel service is low, estheticism, education, and escapism have better effects. Therefore, e-retailers can use the website background, color, design, and font to emphasize the visual design and to create visual appeal, entertainment, and enjoyment. If the website content regards the users as the learner, the website should provide the information relative to the users and also conform to their demands. In addition, e-retailers must pay attention to the completeness of information on the website. If e-retailers expect users to escape into their websites, they should create content (e.g. chat rooms, online games, and discussion areas) that enables users to join in on their own initiative [2]. When importance of personnel service is high, no single virtual experience can generate

the most experiential value. E-retailers must emphasize on a combination of estheticism and peripheral entertainment to attract consumers and thus increase profit. Consequently, e-retailers should not neglect consumer value when creating the virtual experience. They can use vividness and interaction technology to customize the virtual environments. This may result in an experience that better fits in customers' demands and creates diverse customer experiential value.

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