Selective Versus Comprehensive Processors: Gender Differences in Web Consumer Behavior

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This study examined the moderating effects of gender on a model of Internet consumer behavior, incorporating consumer experience and atmospherics cues (quality of the information) on behavioral variables. The quality of the information was operationalized as structure, informativeness, and effectiveness of information content. Entertainment was also included to reflect the hedonic function of a website. Based on the literature, we developed and tested the Experience–Atmospherics–Behavior Model with a sample of consumers who responded to a questionnaire after navigating through a web site. Then, the moderating role of gender on web browsing behavior was examined. Consistent with expectations, compared to males, females tended to use more central cues and a longer navigational process.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Internet is rapidly becoming an important platform for diffusing product information and purchasing products. However, little is known about how Web atmospherics impact consumers’ web browsing behavior. In addition, we do not have any knowledge about whether the same Web atmospherics influence males and females in a different way. To address these research gaps, this study proposes a model of information seeking in an online retailing environment. The moderating effects of gender are examined to see how and why males and females are impacted by different elements of a Web environment.

According to Meyers-Levy’s selectivity model (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran 1991), males are selective information processors, acquire information heuristically, and tend to miss subtle cues, whereas females engage in effortful, comprehensive, and itemized analysis of all available information. Gender differences in information processing are also attributed to their difference in cranial hemispheric activity (Meyers-Levy 1994). Specifically, males are right-hemisphere-dependent, excelling at nonverbal processing, visual acuity, and visual spatial processing, whereas females are left-hemisphere-dependent, excelling verbal processing, attentiveness to detail, and superior reading skills.

Based on an extensive literature search, we developed an Experience–Atmospherics–Behavior model of Internet consumer behavior. This proposed model incorporates consumer experience and atmospherics cues (quality of the information) on online behavioral variables. The quality of the information was operationalized as site structure, informativeness, and effectiveness of information content. Entertainment was also included to reflect the hedonic function of a website. Online behavior included site attitude, site involvement, exploratory behavior and pre-purchase intentions.

The hypotheses are partly based on the propositions of the selectivity model and on findings in internet and communication research: Since women are characterized as comprehensive processors of information, they will exhibit a more complex search process than men. Consequently, during the visit the effect of: (a) entertainment on exploratory behavior should be more important on men than on women; (b) challenges on exploratory behavior should be more important on women than on men; (c) challenges on pre-purchase intentions should be more important on women than on men; (d) structure of the web site on attitudes toward the site should be more important on men than on women; (e) informativeness on exploratory behavior should be more important on women than on men; (f) effectiveness of information content on exploratory behavior should be more important on men than on women.

The proposed model was tested with a convenience sample of real consumers who responded to a questionnaire after navigating through an existing pharmaceutical web site. Using exploratory and confirmatory analyses, the ten-factor structure was confirmed, and convergent and discriminant validity were verified. Prior to full invariance tests, two baseline structural models were tested, one for males (N=116) and the other for females (N=145). For both, all measurement model paths were significant and 11 out of 14 causal paths were significant and in the hypothesized direction for both males and females, and the standardized results of these models were very good. To test our hypotheses, a multiple-group analysis using EQS tested the equality of both measurement and structural paths across purchasing modes, by imposing equality constraints on parameters of the male and the female models, and a number of paths were found to differ between the two groups.

The first finding relates to the differences in the number of significant paths for males and female respondents, indicating that the female model reflects a more complex information search process that the male model. Second, females seem to use skills and challenge to impact exploratory behavior, while males only use challenges to impact site attitudes and pre-purchase intentions. Third, a similar interpretation holds for the impact of effectiveness of information content impacting site involvement only for females, as well as the impact of effectiveness of information content and exploratory behavior impacting site involvement, also significant only for females. Fourth, there is no gender difference in the impact of entertainment on site involvement and attitudes. However, females should like highly-entertaining sites that impact positively their exploratory behavior, meaning they browse and scroll more in order to get more enjoyment. This is not surprising as entertainment is a peripheral cue and both males and females are assumed to process it heuristically. Fifth, effectiveness of information content had effects only on the males’ exploratory behavior, while this variable has more complex effects on females by having also a link with site involvement. They collect more information about the product they search for.

Finally, site attitudes are impacted by structure only for males. This is the only central cue to affect attitudes toward the website. This short path, the use of this variable and the negative path between informativeness and exploratory behavior indicate less than comprehensive processors. On the other hand, females use more central cues and a longer process to develop site attitudes through the mediation of site involvement and exploratory behavior. In conclusion, the hypotheses partially based on the selectivity model are supported and our findings provide new original insights into gender differences in online information processing.

REFERENCES
