Online Consumer Learning: an Exploratory Study of Brands’ Objectives and Consumers’ Perceptions

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A product’s success strongly depends on how consumers learn to use it. This paper investigates such learning processes in online settings. A qualitative exploratory study based on the analysis of a corpus of online courses (B2C, Peer2Peer, contextualized and decontextualized courses) and on a series of semi-structured interviews is conducted in order to understand companies’ objectives and consumers’ perception regarding online courses. Results namely show that informants prefer contextualized courses developed by peers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Imagine you were to use the new washing machine you did just buy and you need more information on how to use it properly, are you more likely to use the written manual enclosed in the machine package or to learn how to do it through the Internet? Should the information and explanation appear in the same way in the two media? More broadly, this paper focuses on consumers’ e-learning process and the extent to which its perceived quality is influenced by a series of environmental factors. Research remains largely unexplored in this area. The e-learning literature focuses more on school (teachers-students) or professional (employers-employees) contexts than on consumer settings (Bernardin, 2005). Moreover, extant studies have drawn on pedagogy (how to educate children) and have neglected the basic principles of andragogy (how to train adults) that may depart from pedagogical theories.

A recent study by Monnot (2010), as to the way consumers learn to use a product, makes a distinction between three consumer profiles: 1) the “autonomous consumers” trying to solve problems on their own, 2) the “assisted consumers”, who look for help from another person or by using support material provided by the company, and 3) the “delegating consumers” who get round the problem by delegating the task to a third person. Other studies have investigated a series of antecedents and consequences of consumer learning. For Lakshmanan and Krishnan (2010, 2011), step-by-step instructions, as they usually appear in manuals, negatively affect learning. Similarly, in a context where products tend to increase in complexity and the consumer suffers from a certain “fatigue” regarding the number and complexity of product features (Fang and Xu, 2011), studies paradoxically show that manuals are only partially read, flown over or not read at all (Eiriksdottir and Catrambone, 2011; Lee and Lehto, 2013; Monnot, 2010). Furthermore, previous research suggests that learning improves product knowledge, attitudes, intention to use or purchase, trust, commitment, loyalty and impacts switching costs (ADC, 2012; Aubert, 2007, 2010; Batkoska and Koseska, 2012; Eel and Sou-Suh, 2005; Hennig-Thurau, 2000; Humeau-Feenstra, 2010; Jones & al., 2003; Laskshmanan and Krishnan, 2010, 2011; Robra-Bissantz and Götzelt, 2005).

This research focuses on online consumer learning or “customer focused e-learning” (Aldrich, 2000, Barron, 2000; Montandon and Zentriegen, 2003; Robra-Bissantz and Götzelt, 2005). Several studies have been concentrating on the antecedents of e-learning satisfaction and on e-learning outcomes. Tele-presence, media-richness and interactivity prove to be the major antecedents of consumer learning as well as of e-learning satisfaction (Eel, Sou-Suh, 2005; Sun & al., 2008). The more an e-Learning course is interactive, the more it will be effective (Eel, Sou-Suh, 2005). Preferences concerning the source of information in the e-learning process can vary. This study considers two sources of information: companies (BtoC) and other consumers (Peer to Peer).

Online manuals and instructions developed by companies generally target adult consumers, which has potential implications on the learning process. However, general learning theories are often based on pedagogical premises, which are thought for children (Zhang & al., 2006). In reaction, Bernardin (2005) and Humeau-Feenstra (2010) suggest to develop specific ways to train adults. The concept of andragogy, which is the theory of adult learning (Taylor, Kroth, 2009) has been introduced by Knowles (1992). Andragogy differs from pedagogy according to six principles: self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, internal motivation and need to know (Knowles, 1992 in Chan, 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

An exploratory qualitative study has been carried out in order to address the following research questions:

1. What are the e-learning objectives and techniques used by companies/brands that offer a range of online courses?

2. How do consumers perceive the quality of these e-learning courses?

We analysed the content of 81 business-to-consumer (B2C) online courses. The sample represents 47 contextualized courses (showing the product in its actual usage context; e.g. hair styling lessons) vs. 34 decontextualized courses (focusing on the only presentation of the product itself; e.g. how to install a TV set) from 23 service providers and 56 product brands. In addition, we conducted nine semi-structured interviews with adult consumers aged 20 to 54, who were confronted to four types of online courses chosen among the first study sample (contextualized vs. decontextualized and (non-) interactive B2C vs. P2P). Thematic and lexical analyses have been carried out on the data material and the trustworthiness (i.e., validity and reliability) of the results presented below is enhanced by theory and method triangulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

B2C e-Learning objectives

Our data show that brands offering e-Learning courses may pursue a series of objectives. Some brands try to promote product bundling by presenting a range of products that are used together for a specific learning objective (e.g. in the make-up lessons proposed by Yves Rocher, the advertised products are sold at the end of the presentation); other brands try to reduce or remove consumption obstacles, which is often the case in the medical field (e.g. Aspirin). More broadly, objectives of the analyzed e-learning courses refer to sales, positioning, communication, optimization of the physical point of sale, relationship marketing, entertainment, online diffusion of manuals, source of income and legal imperatives. However, informants often seem to only perceive the advertising objective of those courses (Colette, nurse: “For me, it’s more like advertising […] It’s more for drawing attention than for explaining how to do it”). They are generally suspicious about B2C e-Learning initiatives and perceive them as not adapted to their needs. Therefore, consumers often prefer P2P learning courses taken from discussion forums, professional or personal blogs or websites and video sharing platforms, as the peers’ goal appears as sharing an experience rather than selling a product. Finally, informants seem to prefer contextualized courses, often referring to a repeated activity, over decontextualized courses related to a specific problem solving situation (e.g. installing or repairing a product).
PERCEPTION OF E-LEARNING COURSES

The analyzed online courses use a combination of different media, such as text, photographs, videos, animations, etc. Informants seem to be entertained by interactive courses but rely more on the content of the course than on the way it is presented. This is especially true for P2P courses. The frequently poor quality of the videos is neglected in favor of the added value of testimonials, cues, or advises brought by peers. Moreover, they prefer P2P courses for reasons of trust and identification with the “instructor” (“So, obviously you can really see how it is done step by step. And I can say, well, obviously, if she managed to do it, even though she’s not a hairdresser, I can do it, too.” Nayelle, student). Quality criteria principally focus on depth of information, avoidance of technical language, freedom of choice in the products used, etc. and are related to andragogical principles. According to most informants, P2P learning courses often meet these criteria, which is not always the case of B2C courses. The perceived quality of P2P courses appears to be even higher when they are presented in their context. A P2P contextualized course is likely to increase consumers’ curiosity and personal interest, which makes learning more effective.

In conclusion, this exploratory study indicates that the perceived quality of online courses varies according to two dimensions: the contextualized vs. decontextualized presentation of the product and the source of information (P2P vs. B2C). In addition to a well-structured and media-rich online course, trust and identification with the source of information appear to be important factors when developing e-Learning courses. More broadly, B2C or P2P e-Learning can be used as a strategic tool to extend uses of the product or to reach a new target, regarding the three levers of innovation: new technologies, new usages and new targets.

REFERENCES


