The Impact of Emotions on Customers’ Perception of Website Atmospheric Cues: an Empirical Cross-Cultural Investigation

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This paper examines the impacts of emotions on customers’ perception of website high- and low-task relevant cues. In turn, the associations of site atmospheric cues on site attitudes, site involvement, and purchase intentions are investigated. The proposed model is compared between Canadian and Chinese customers based on Hofstede’s (1991) cultural value dimensions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Eroglu, Machleit and David (2001) categorized the environmental cues into two groups: high- and low-task relevant cues. They defined high-task relevant cues as all the site descriptors on the screen which facilitate the consumer’s shopping goal attainment and low-task relevant cues as the ones that are “relatively inconsequential to the completion of the shopping task” (p. 180).

Previous research has studied the importance of site atmospheric cues such as site informativeness and entertainment (e.g. Davis, Wang, Lingridge, 2008; Hausman and Siekpe, 2009; Richard, 2005). It has been suggested that these site atmospheric cues influence customers variables such as site attitudes, involvement, flow, and purchase intentions (Hausman and Siekpe, 2009; Richard and Chandra, 2005). Surprisingly, the impact of emotions is often ignored in customers’ evaluation of site atmospheric cues. The purpose of this research is twofold: First, consistent with Zajonc’s (1980) theory of emotions we propose that the customers’ emotions arise upon the initial Internet experience, which influence other affective and cognitive variables. As a result, we investigated the impacts of emotions on customers’ perception of site high-task and low-task relevant atmospheric cues. Then, following the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1972) and previous literature, we hypothesize the impacts of customers’ perception of site atmospheric cues on other consumer variables such as site attitudes and site involvement, and purchase intention.

Second, the attempt was made to compare the proposed model between two cultures: Chinese and Canadian. Given the wide reach of Internet and the fact that culture does impact the customers’ responses to store atmospherics (Davice, Wang, and Lingridge, 2008); it is crucial to explore the role of culture in customers’ reactions to the online store atmospherics. Based on Hofstede’s (1991) cultural value dimensions, we hypothesized that the impact of high- and low-task relevant cues on customer variables vary across the two cultures.

For testing the hypotheses, 8 service industries were chosen: hotels, online bookstores, dental services, banks, vacation destination, restaurants, financial investments and plastic surgery. We selected four websites four dental services, two sites for online bookstores, four sites for restaurants, two sites for financial investments, four sites for hotels, four sites for plastic surgery, three sites for vacation destinations and two sites for banks. The subjects were randomly assigned to one of the twenty five websites. They were exposed to a real website of a service company and were asked to surf the site and collect information.

Data were collected online using a computer lab in a large Northeastern university. After elimination, the data consist of 234 Chinese (54% female and 46% male) and 350 Canadian (58% female and 42% male). The majority of the respondents were undergraduate students (98.3% of Chinese and 98.9% of Canadian) between the age of 18 to 24 (75% of Chinese and 80% of Canadian).

The results of multi-group analyses in EQS strongly supported the overall model. Emotions strongly impacted the customers’ perception of high- and low-task relevant cues in both cultures. Customers’ perceptions of site atmospheric cues influenced customers’ attitudes toward the site and site involvement; which in turn impacted purchase intentions. Moreover, the result suggested that the impacts of low-task relevant cues on site attitudes and site involvement are stronger for Chinese customers compared to their Canadian counterparts. On the other hand, customers’ perceptions of high-task relevant cues on site attitudes and involvement was found to be stronger for Canadian customers compared to their Chinese counterparts.

REFERENCES