

Interactivity and Amusement in Electronic Commerce

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INTRODUCTION

The use of structural features such as text size, font, graphics, color, animation, video and audio has been widely explored in the traditional media. Similar uses of such features have also been found in the online environment (Rodgers & Thorson, 2000). Factors related to consumer's behavior, attitude, and perceptions regarding Web sites have been examined in academic literature (Chen & Wells, 1999; Coyle & Thorson, 2001; Ducoffe, 1996; Eighmey, 1997; Koufaris, 2002; Koufaris, Kambil, & Labarbera, 2001; Vijayasarathy, 2003). They include the investigation of effects of interactive features on Web site appeal (Ghose & Dou, 1998), and e-store characteristics on site traffic and sales (Lohse & Spiller, 1998). Some experimental studies examined the effects of animation and image maps on perceived telepresence and consumer attitude (e.g., Coyle & Thorson, 2001), and the use of pop-up windows on consumer decision-making processes (Xia & Sudharshan, 2000).

BACKGROUND

The current literature is gradually expanding on the study of using interactive features to provide visitors a more realistic experience, and the exploration of using amusement techniques to enhance entertainment value of a Web site. Recent literature has also extended Resnik and Stern's (1977) content analytical method to examine Web site information content and design features (Ghose & Dou, 1996; Huizingh, 2000; Palmer & Griffith, 1998; Philport & Arbittier, 1997). Mitra (2003) argues that institutions find themselves dwelling at the intersection of the real and the virtual, and are consequently faced with a more complex act than developing a Web site in order to make its appearance in cyberspace attractive. Thus, more aspects of a Web-based communications message, especially attributes related to interactivity, entertainment, and amusement need to be explored.

INTERACTIVITY

An important attribute of using a Web site to disseminate product information and conduct e-commerce is its ability to engage customers in interacting with the Web site. Interactive functions include text-based email inquiries, feedback forms, and multimedia components that attempt to retain customers at the site for longer visits. Entertaining features in the hypermedia include pictures, virtual reality displays of products, multimedia shows, online games, and the use of cartoons and humor. A Web site is a mix of direct selling and advertising with characteristics of both general product display and interactive involvement with customers (Berthon, Pitt, & Watson, 1996). In addition to providing product information, a Web site can engage visitors in dialogues such as inquiries, suggestions, order status tracking, new product proposal, and online problem diagnostics (Ghose & Dou, 1998). This medium affords a rich collection of formats that are available to the marketer in the presentation of products.

One such format is the personalization (e.g., yahoo.com) and customization (e.g., NikeID.com) offered by informational and corporate portals. Such features as intelligent agents, online help functions, recommender systems, custom-tailored news tickers and personalized home pages made it easy for online firms to service specific shopping needs of consumers (Andre & Rist, 2002). Research showed that a company's willingness to customize its products and services had a positive impact on customer trust in the company both online and off-line (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Koufaris & Hampton-Sosa, 2004).

Interactivity is an important dimension of features that distinguish the Internet from other media. Though the concept of interactivity can be conceptualized in many different ways, defining it as a medium characteristic best reflects the exchange between a Web user and the site (Lombard & Snyder-Duch, 2001). According to Steuer (1992), interactivity is "the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time" (p. 84). Interactive func-

tions allow the user to participate actively in the exchange and persuasion process through direct manipulation of the structural elements of a site (Rodgers & Thorson, 2000). Like television, the interactivity of this medium provides the potential to deliver information in an entertaining form.

Hypermedia is multimedia. Animation, video and audio complement traditional text and graphics when used judiciously. Entertainment supports experiential flow of surfers who engage in “shallow, sensory-level, peripheral processing of the executional aspects of the message” (Singh & Dalal, 1999, p.95). In addition to traditional features such as color, size, typeface, product class, appeal type, animation, audio, sound level, sound clarity, and movement, new design elements like vividness, realism, and interactivity need to be considered in the context of the Web (Rodgers & Thorson, 2000). In a study of 651 companies from Yahoo! and Dutch Yellow Pages, Huizingh (2000) finds that larger sites tend to contain more forms of entertainment features such as pictures, jokes, cartoons, games, and video clips than smaller sites.

A picture is worth a thousand words. Certain types of animation used to display a product from a multi-dimensional perspective and activated upon user request derive benefits at least comparable to large pictures that are often available upon user clicks at most online shopping sites. Animated product displays enhance the directness of user product experience, which has been found to produce more confidently held and more enduring attitudes (Smith & Swinyard, 1983). With animation, product detail can be presented from more angles than with still pictures. Graphics, animation, and video clips might be some of the elements that prevent a casual visitor from simply clicking away from a site.

AMUSEMENT

In addition to product display, animation also provides amusement through imparting motion and activity in products and cartoons that could consequently be perceived as lively, active, or spirited. The use of humor has also been widely explored in advertising as well as computer-mediated communications (Morkes, Kernal, & Nass, 1999; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). Research has shown that humor attracts attention and seems to be most effective in ads promoting low-risk routine purchases. In a series of field studies, Scott, Klein, and Bryant (1990) found that humorous fliers increased attendance at social events like neighborhood picnics and clambakes, though having little effect on attendance of business gatherings.

When a Web surfer is engaged in low-risk message processing, peripheral cues like animation and humor may be used and can succeed in gaining visitor attention as

they do in traditional media (Weinberger, Spotts, Campbell, & Parsons, 1995). A more likable interface will also encourage visitors to visit more pages and stay longer, hence nurturing a more positive attitude.

Humor fulfills audience's needs for escapism, diversion, aesthetic enjoyment, and emotional release. Humor's intention is to amuse and entertain people, to make them laugh, and to convey light-hearted enjoyment through “an incongruous comment that is recognized by the receiver as an attempt to amuse and that succeeds at amusing” (Morkes et al., 1999, p.403). In addition to entertainment, humor also helps gain attention and comprehension, especially when humor is related to the products presented (Speck, 1991).

Web site designers for apparent reasons have examined amusement features in a great length. A first-time visitor judges a site by its look: eye-catching graphics and animations, along with navigation buttons and company logos. Software packages intended to enhance Web site appeal have been developed by many vendors, and software technologies such as Flash® and LiveMotion® have been used by many Web sites as entrance pages for the purpose of entertainment and amusement.

RESEARCH ON EFFECTS OF INTERACTIVITY AND AMUSEMENT

The study of interactive and amusement Web techniques and their effects have been conducted in both advertising and information systems research. This section briefly summarizes the research findings reported in the current literature.

Philport and Arbittier (1997) studied the content of over 2000 commercial communications messages across TV, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet, and found no distinguishing characteristics in Web advertising, that is, banner ads were not particularly different in any dimension. This observation suggests to us that we probably should look at an entire Web site in the study of techniques and effects in the hypermedia. Ghose and Dou (1998) found that greater degrees of interactivity, defined by the total count of interactive functions considered in their research, related positively to Web site appeal.

Coyle and Thorson (2001) argue that interactivity and vividness are the two main factors affecting perceived telepresence, and consequently attitude toward the site. In addition, they found that the presence of image maps, audio and animation influence perceived telepresence and attitude toward the site. Higher perceived interactivity of a Web site also leads to a more positive attitude toward the site (Jee & Lee, 2002).

A user profile study found that, in addition to information, structure and design of a Web site are important

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