Informed, Empowered, or Paralyzed?
Outcomes from Engaging in a Website

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INTRODUCTION

Various claims exist of the internet and interactive web technology as a tool to empower consumers (Kozinets et al, 2010; Pires et al, 2006). The internet offers consumers unparalleled access to a massive body of knowledge and information with comparatively lower search costs relative to established sources of information (Bakos, 1997). This has the potential to increase the bargaining power of consumers and redress power imbalances due to information asymmetry by providing access to information formerly only available to professionals. This facilitates choice and risk reduction that in turn enables consumers to exercise increasing control over their consumption activities (Ariely, 2000). Consequently, it is believed that consumers are abandoning their former passive roles.

The use of technology to empower consumers has been termed "e-empowerment" (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008: 1773), which "refers to how the net, as an enabling technology, allows people to do things that they found difficult to do and were unable to achieve before". The ability of digital technology to shift greater power to the consumer from the marketer is emerging as a distinct field of enquiry, yet "the discussion of consumer power through digital media is in its infancy" with many aspects poorly understood (Labrecque et al., 2013: 266). Füller et al. (2009:94) note that the impact of tools and technology on "individuals' perceived empowerment has been rather neglected".

We contribute to this discussion by exploring both the construct of e-empowerment as well as its impact. We use the term e-empowerment to incorporate synonymous terms such as "empowerment by the web" (Zwass, 2010), "online consumer empowerment" (Siano et al., 2011) and "digital empowerment" (Zhao et al., 2008). Specifically, this chapter critically evaluates the extent to which use of interactive web tools and technology (in the form of an interactive pension scheme website) can empower consumers and facilitate their pension management.

BACKGROUND

Empowerment is both a process and an outcome (Pires et al., 2006). Empowerment as a process involves the transformative manner by which individuals develop skills, test their knowledge and gain control over issues that concern them. Empowerment as an outcome results in a state or condition of the individual who feels a greater sense of understanding, a greater sense of control and may demonstrate more active efforts to exert that control (Zimmerman & Warschausky, 1998). The process of empowerment does not

necessarily lead to empowerment outcomes, although empowerment outcomes can be greatly reinforced by empowerment mechanisms.

Denegri-Knott et al (2006) suggest that studies of empowerment should be contextualized and situated. Hence, we locate our study of empowerment within the context of the e-environment, focusing specifically on the transformative impact of the e-environment in relation to empowerment outcomes.

A selection of empirical studies that assess the degree to which use of the internet and technology empowers individuals in their consumption practice is summarized in Table 1. This is not an exhaustive list, but rather presented as an overview of illustrative empirical work. Whilst these studies have clearly shown the empowering impact of the technology, they have failed to adequately account for the theoretical conceptualization of e-empowerment and have tended to focus on affective or psychological outcomes of technology use rather than behavioral outcomes. We address these limitations by developing measurement items for e-empowerment that account for psychological and behavioral empowerment outcomes.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Saving for one's retirement and the active management of that activity is an individual behavior that if managed inappropriately has a detrimental impact not only on the well-being of the individual but on the wider economic well-being of society. Increasing retirement saving is thus acknowledged as important

Table 1. Overview of empirical studies concerning e-empowerment

Date	Author(s)	Context	Key Findings
2014	Polo Peña, Frías Jamilena & Rodríguez Molina	Delivery of value co-creation via ICT (i.e. ability to aid time management, security, accessibility and price) (Rural tourism)	Firms' ICT capabilities (adoption and extent of ICT use) are an antecedent to B2C value co-creation (i.e. enabling customers to create value). Value co-creation enhances customer perceived value and loyalty.
2011	van Beuningen, de Ruyter & Wetzels	Online Information Provision (Investment choice and online training programme)	An increase in self-efficacy perceptions as a result of completing online information search results in an increase in perceptions of service value.
2011	Matzler, Steiger & Füller	Online Product Configuration (Personal Computer)	Customer confusion when faced with increased choice is lessened by prior product knowledge and online tool usability
2010	Fuchs, Prandelli & Schreier	Online new product selection (T-shirts & breakfast cereals)	"Empowerment-to-select" those new products which are to be produced increases psychological ownership and willingness to pay more but this effect depends on customer perceptions of their own competence.
2009	Füller, Mühlbacher, Marzler & Jawecki	Internet based co-creation (10 product categories)	Well-designed online co-creation tools trigger consumer perceptions of empowerment and enjoyment of new product development tasks.
2009	van Beuningen, de Ruyter, Wetzels & Streukens	Online information provision (Investment choice)	Evaluations of credibility and quality of online information positively influence self-efficacy perceptions particularly for novice consumers. In addition, individuals with high-role engagement put greater emphasis on source credibility compared to less engaged consumers.
2006	Harrison, Waite & Hunter	Online Information Provision	Consumers generally perceive the internet as empowering but there are gaps between consumer information need and organizational provision.

Adapted from Harrison & Waite, 2015.

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