

EFFECTS OF WEB EXPERIENCE ON CONSUMER CHOICE: A MULTICULTURAL APPROACH

Efthymios Constantinides

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE
School of Management and Governance
Enschede, The Netherlands
e.constantinides@utwente.nl

Carlota Lorenzo-Romero

UNIVERSITY OF CASTILLA-LA MANCHA, Faculty of Economics and Business.
Department of Marketing.
Albacete, Spain
Carlota.Lorenzo@uclm.es

Miguel A. Gómez

UNIVERSITY OF CASTILLA-LA MANCHA
Faculty of Economics and Business. Department of Marketing.
Albacete, Spain
MiguelAngel.Gborja@uclm.es

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1. INTRODUCTION: SCOPE OF THE STUDY

With more than 1,5 billion users worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2009) the web has become a major contributor to business globalization and trade but also a tool of customer sophistication and empowerment (McDonald and Tobin, 1998; Rha et al 2002; Urban, 2003). According to a recent Nielsen Online report (2008), Internet shopping has already been adopted by more than 95% of the Internet users in some countries; 99% of Internet users in South Korea have shopped online closely followed by German, UK and Japanese. US consumers are at the eighth position of the list. According to the same study 40% of the total online population is regular online shoppers while 85% of the Internet users have done an online purchase at least once a month until the end of 2007. E-commerce in Europe is forecasted to reach 323 billion Euros (\$407 billion) by 2011. The predictions are based on an average 25% growth rate each year from 2007 to 2011. The three biggest online shopping countries are Germany, the UK and France, accounting for about 72% of all online sales in Europe. Italy, Spain and the Netherlands are expected to grow to large European e-commerce hubs markets in the above mentioned period (BizReport, 2007).

The global reach of the Internet opens new windows of opportunity to many corporations. Yet in the culturally fragmented and diverse global online marketplace, businesses are facing also a number of dilemmas and challenges in their effort to reach, attract, persuade and retain the online customer. Okazaki (2004) and Burgmann et al. (2006) identified culture-based differences but also similarities in web site design between countries. There is also evidence that growing media and technology convergence on global scale affect not only consumption

patterns but also the cultural signature of users resulting in a global “digital culture” (e.g. Deuze, 2006).

Online consumer behavior in culturally homogenous or heterogeneous markets is an issue that has drawn substantial research attention (Cockburn and Wilson, 1996; Jarvenpaa and Todd, 1997; Liu et al., 2000; Childers et al., 2001; Eastin, 2002; Corbitt et al., 2003; Dillon and Reif, 2004; Vrechopoulos, 2002 and 2004; Dailey, 2004; Tan and Wei, 2006; Lorenzo et al., 2007; Tractinsky and Lowengart, 2007; Kim and Lennon, 2008, etc.) but studies have been often inconclusive (Briley and Aaker, 2006). With regard to research on online consumer behavior in cross-cultural contexts, many studies are focused on differences in culturally-influenced elements such as trust or aesthetics of web sites. In that sense, most available cross-country studies are examining a limited number of the components of what is commonly called Web Experience (Constantinides, 2004) mostly analyzing the effects of these components in isolation.

An issue that has so far received little research attention is the combined effect of all components of Web Experience in multicultural or multi-ethnic settings on the actual online buying behavior. The objective of this study is to analyze and compare the impact of the Web experience factors on the decision making process and particularly the choice of online vendor for a standardized product in two different countries. The study will provide a number of directions for further research on cross-country online consumer behavior and also provide useful insights to web designers and strategists operating in cross-cultural online environments.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Culture as a marketing parameter

Culture is mentioned in the majority of marketing and consumer behavior textbooks as a major influencer of consumer behavior and as one of the essential criteria of market

segmentation (Dibb et al., 1998 and 2000; Harrel and Frazier, 1999; Czinkota and Kotabe, 2001; Jobber 2007; Boyd et al., 2002; Brassington and Pettitt, 2003; Solomon and Stuart, 2003, Hoyer and McInnis, 2007). Cultural idiosyncrasies are identified as decisive success factors of international and global marketing activities (e.g. Nakata and Sivakumar, 1996; Jobber, 2007) and there is plenty of research and anecdotal evidence about product and brand failures in overseas markets because of unawareness of cultural differences and sensitivities (Ricks, 1993). Nations and ethnic groups are usually treated by marketers as cultural entities and cultural differences are important topics of marketing research (Steenkamp, 2001). A lively debate among sociologists and cultural anthropologists has been going on for some time about the proper way to define and rate cross-cultural differences. Hofstede (1980) identified five dimensions (Power distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance and Long Term vs. Short Term Orientation) describing cultural differences between nations. Hofstede's methodology has been often criticized (e.g. Ng, Lee and Soutar, 2006; Triandis et al., 1990; Yeh, 2005) and alternative cross-cultural models have been proposed (Schwartz 1994, Schwartz and Ros, 1995; Trompenaars, 1993). Yet the Hofstede framework has been widely endorsed by academics from a variety of management disciplines as basis for cross-cultural studies and dissertations (Sivakumar and Nakata, 2001). Many researchers argue that marketing aspects such as brands, product design, web site design, etc., are likely to be successful overseas if adapted in different countries on the basis of cultural differences and local customs (Usunier, 1996; Herbig, 1998; Mooij de, 2003b).

This study is focused on the online consumer behavior of Internet users located in two different geographical areas in Europe (Spain and The Netherlands) that according to the

Hofstede's approach¹ are countries with different cultural signatures. Comparison of the cultural components of the two countries outlines two distinct cultural profiles (table I).

Table I. Comparison of Spain and The Netherlands on the basis of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (*approximate values)

Cultural Dimension Index*	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty avoidance
Spain	52	45	38	80
The Netherlands	32	80	14	53

The Hofstede approach has already been used as basis for cross-cultural comparisons of web site design elements. Zahir et al. (2002) found that cross-cultural differences based on the Hofstede dimensions can be related to differences in design of web portals in different countries. In the same vein, Singh, Kumar and Baack (2005), show that web sites depict the cultural values of their origin countries. The prevailing view among practitioners is that cultural differences must be taken into consideration in order to communicate effectively with overseas markets; anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of companies adapt their websites to the local cultural values.

2.2. Culture and consumer behavior

The cultural influence on consumer behavior in online global environments is a relatively new research topic compared to the quite substantial amount of research on consumer behavior in physical, traditional markets that has been conducted during the last forty years (e.g. Roth, 1995; Aaker and Maheswaran, 1997). During the last two decades markets have indeed become increasingly global, more competitive and transparent not only due to elimination of trade barriers and extensive outsourcing of value adding activities but mainly due to increasing access of producers and consumers to new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Specifically, the spreading of the Internet and the exponential growth of online commercial transactions have placed the cultural issue high on the marketers' agenda:

¹ <http://www.geert-hofstede.com>

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doing business in the Internet, exposes firms to potential customers with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Constructing ethnic-centric web sites by global firms is a widely accepted and common online strategy (Tsikriktsis, 2002; Burgmann et al., 2006). Some researchers have dissenting views about including cultural nuances at the website; Johnston and Johal (1999) propose that the Internet is immune to cultural influence and, therefore, not identifiable with cultural classification schemes. While researchers speculate about culture's influence on Internet shopping behavior, no empirical evidence exists to support either perspective (Chan and Tai, 2001). Current cross-cultural research on shopping behavior is limited and fails to make any direct comparisons or model online customer behavior (Chan and Tai, 2001). Calls for further cross-cultural research, particularly in the online setting, are found in academic articles (Cole and O'Keefe, 2000; Park and Jung, 2003) and the commercial press (Forbes, 2000). In this context, Davis, Wang and Lindridge (2008) studied how cultural influence on responses to atmospheric cues differed between American and Chinese online customers. For that they used two different site designs for a fictional online retailer. American and Chinese University students evaluated their shopping experience at an assigned site. As main findings, the authors concluded that cultural values do affect customers' responses to atmospheric cues, taking into account the inter-relationships between customers' emotional responses. Teo and Liu (2007) examined the antecedents and consequences of consumer trust in the United States, Singapore and China. The results of their study show that reputation and system assurance of an Internet vendor and consumers' propensity to trust are positively related to consumer trust. Consumers' trust has a positive relationship with attitude and a negative relationship with perceived risk. Within this topic, Bin, Chen, and Sun (2003), study the differences between e-commerce in the U.S. and China through analyzing Internet users' behaviors especially their attitudes toward different payment systems in both countries and

discuss how to remove language barriers to enhance net growth. Lee, Joshi, and McIvor (2007), identify the differences of online consumer satisfaction in the context of three different cultures, namely the UK, United States, and South Korea. Park and Jun (2003), analyzed the cross-cultural effects of Internet usage, perceived risks and innovativeness on Internet buying behavior between Korean and the U.S. They found significant differences regarding Internet usage and perceived risk of Internet shopping between both samples. Finally Chau, Cole, Massey, Montoya-Weiss, and O'Keefe (2002), analyze the cultural differences in consumer's online behaviors concluding that the similar perception of websites by users from different cultural countries could increase the development of a global e-commerce.

2.3. The Web Experience (WE)

Academic studies (Gallero et al., 2006) and studies done by practitioners (Nielsen/Net Ratings, 2003; Foresee, 2006) have frequently linked the perceived quality experienced by online customers with their overall shopping experience. The online (or web) experience has become the subject of academic research (e.g. Liu et al., 2000; Hong and Landay, 2001; Vrechopoulos, 2002; Duyne et al., 2003; Constantinides, 2004; Constantinides and Geurts, 2005; Tractinsky and Lowengart, 2007.). The need to provide superb online experience has persuaded many firms to appoint Customer Experience Managers, responsible for the online marketing, to up to date the corporate web site and the content development (McKinsey, 1999).

Tamini et al. (2003) define the Web Experience (WE) as a four stage process describing the successive steps of an online transaction. Given that an online consumer is not simply a shopper but also an information technology user (Cho and Park, 2001) one could argue that the online experience is a more complex issue than the physical shopping experience. The WE can be defined as the consumer's whole perception about the online company

(Watchfire, 2000) resulting from his/her exposure to a combination of virtual marketing tools ...“under the marketer’s direct control, likely to influence the buying behavior of the online consumer” (Constantinides, 2002).

Plenty of research done in recent years has been focused on controllable factors affecting the online customer’s behavior and the way these factors contribute to the online experience. The WE embraces elements like searching, browsing, finding, selecting, comparing and evaluating information as well as interacting and transacting with the online firm. The online customer’s perceptions and actions are influenced by design, events, emotions, atmosphere and other elements experienced during interaction with a given web site, elements meant to induce customer goodwill and affect the final outcome of the online interaction. Constantinides (2004) based on the findings of studies published in 48 research papers between 1997 and 2003 proposed an extensive taxonomy summarizing these factors. The proposed model identifies three clusters (Functionality Factors, Psychological factors and Content factors) and five categories (Usability, Interactivity, Trust, Aesthetics and Marketing Mix) as dimensions of the controllable WE.

3. STUDY OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The study, based on the previous discussion on the effects of culture on consumer behavior, aims at measuring and evaluating the effects of the online experience factors on the buying behavior of Internet users from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds by comparing the results of two identical experiments conducted in two European countries, Spain and The Netherlands. Specifically, the objectives are:

- To measure the impact of each of the WE elements on the choice of an online vendor of a standardized product in each of the two countries.
- To compare the impact of WE elements on Spanish and Dutch online consumers.

Next to the effects of WE factors on online consumer behavior the study analyzes the differences among consumers with regard to personal characteristics and previous experience and familiarity of consumers with online shopping, identifying the differential effects of such differences over WE dimensions.

The use of different WE factors in the website design define different online store designs that trigger different shopping behavior by users (Constantinides and Geurts, 2005). In fact, the WE includes elements such as searching, browsing, finding, selecting, etc., with the online vendor. The online consumer emotional and shopping responses are affected by design, events, emotions, atmosphere and other elements experienced interaction with an online vendor (Constantinides, 2002). Specifically, different elements of the online experience are identified and classified in three categories (Constantinides, 2004):

- *Content category*: Factors exercising a direct and powerful influence on the WE by making the website aesthetically positive and its offer tangible and attractive. They include the Aesthetics and Marketing Mix factors.
- *Psychological category*: Trust-building factors; Web sites must communicate trust and ensure users of the vendor's integrity and credibility in order to persuade customers to stop, explore them, and interact online. Building trust is possible by deploying uncertainty-reducing elements, ensuring the safety of customer personal information and transaction data, eliminating fears of fraud and building trust between the online user and the often unknown and far away located vendor.
- *Functionality category*: Factors enhancing the online experience by presenting the virtual client with a good functioning, easy to use and search as well as interactive web site. The Functionality category includes the Usability and Interactivity factors.

Based on the earlier mentioned literature and the findings of Hofstede (2001) (Table I) it is expected that the actual buying behavior between consumers in these two countries will be

also different. Next to cultural differences more factors can influence the buying behavior: Bellman et al. (1999) analyzed consumer responses using panel data that measured 12 predictors. They observed significant differences regarding gender and experience with catalogue shopping as major predictors of consumer buying responses. Other research has analyzed the impact of environmental characteristics on decisions like where and how to shop as well as on the outcomes of the shopping experience (Eroglu et al., 2001 and 2003; Lorenzo et al., 2007). Regarding the effects of new technologies on different ethnical groups de Mooij and Hofstede (2002) and de Mooij (2003a) reject the notion of technology-based cultural convergence arguing that new technologies have not reduced disparities in consumption patterns in different countries arguing that cultural differences should be given special attention in designing global market entry strategies. On the basis of these arguments the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: The effect of the WE elements on Spanish and Dutch consumers when choosing an online vendor is dissimilar. Specifically:

H1a: The influence of Usability in choosing an online vendor is dissimilar.

H1b: The influence of Interactivity in choosing an online vendor is dissimilar.

H1c: The influence of Trust in choosing an online vendor is dissimilar.

H1d: The influence of Aesthetics in choosing an online vendor is dissimilar

H1e: The influence of Marketing Mix in choosing an online vendor is dissimilar.

Davis et al. (2008) argue that the presence of low task relevant cues (i.e. colors, movement of images, animations, etc.) positively affected the level of pleasure American customers felt while shopping, pleasure also positively affected their approach towards the online store; these findings are consistent with previous research (Eroglu et al., 2003; Menon and Kahn, 2002). However, in Davis's et al (2008) Chinese sample, the effect of low task cues on

pleasure was mediated by arousal; pleasure was predictive of Chinese customers' approach behavior. Arousal as a mediating variable for pleasure in a collectivistic culture has important implications for cross-cultural research. The current thinking is that induced arousal limits cognitive capacity, causing potential customers to avoid the store as a way of preventing information overload (Menon and Kennon, 2002).

On the other hand, personal characteristics of consumers such as motivation, trust, experience familiarity with the online shopping, atmospheric responsiveness, etc., have a mediating influence between atmospheric cues and consumer responses (Baron and Kenny, 1986) and affect the choice of an e-vendor. For instance, Gefen, Karahanna and Strau (2003), found that while repeat customers' purchase intentions were influenced by both their trust in the e-vendor and their perception that the website was useful, potential customers were not influenced by perceived usefulness, but only by their trust in the e-vendor.

On the basis of these arguments the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: The personal characteristics of Spanish and Dutch consumers will affect the choice of an online vendor in diverse ways:

H2a: Motives towards online shopping of Spanish and Dutch consumers will have dissimilar effects on the online vendor choice.

H2b: Years of Internet experience of Spanish and Dutch consumers will have dissimilar effects on the online vendor choice.

H2c: Familiarity with online shopping of Spanish and Dutch consumers will have dissimilar effects on the online vendor choice.

4. METHODOLOGY

Survey participants were recruited among university students from two Universities in Spain and The Netherlands. Brislin and Baumgardner (1971) and Vijver van de and Leung (1997) suggested that when conducting cross-country research the responding groups in different

countries should be as similar as possible with regard to demographic and social characteristics. Student samples fulfill these criteria, particularly with regard to age and education. Students are widely used in consumer research in general and online surveys in particular (e.g. Childers et al., 2001; Eroglu et al, 2003; Clough and Driver, 2006; Constantinides and Geurts, 2006; Briley and Aaker, 2006) also due to the fact that students are among the most advanced Internet users.

The study consisted in simulating a realistic virtual shopping activity in a computer laboratory setting. Participants were asked to carry out a specific online shopping assignment: searching for information, finding and carrying out the purchasing process for a digital camera. After having chosen the camera and the vendor participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire. An overview about the online questionnaire design and sample characteristics can be found in table II.

Table II. Virtual survey study: Main questions and sample

SECTION I Introduction form	SECTION II		
	FORM A	FORM B	FORM C
Basic demographic characteristics and questions about the users' attitudes towards online shopping and previous experience with the Internet.	Experiences about the online store where user bought the camera	One of online stores favorites chosen by user (i.e. a web site where had also bought the product)	No favorite online store for user (i.e. a web site where one would never buy the digital camera).
SAMPLE			
SPAIN		THE NETHERLANDS	
204 undergraduate students, divided in 9 sessions		85 undergraduate students; PHD and Postdoctoral students, divided in 4 sessions	

Once respondents had filled the first section of the questionnaire, they could go to search for and select a digital camera on the Internet.

A fictitious amount of 300 Euros was available to each respondent. Regarding the camera type a minimum of technical specifications that the product should meet were drafted. In order to simulate a realistic online shopping experience there were no restrictions regarding camera and vendor choice except two limitations: a) The product could be bought in any online shop anywhere in the world provided that delivery to the country of the buyer was

possible; and b) the camera should be new. The maximum time available for the assignment was 90 minutes. During the process of online shopping each participant had to make two separate lists with the names and the URL address of online vendors experienced as “Favorites” (i.e. vendors the participant considered as good enough to order the camera from) and “Non- Favorites” (i.e. vendors that participants would not choose to buy a product like this) The questionnaire was divided in two Sections, I and II (Forms A, B and C). Section I was about demographics and perceptions of participants about online shopping. Once the purchase choice was done the participants had to fill in the forms of Section II: Form A (regarding the online shop where the product was bought), Form B (regarding the second choice of online shop to buy the product), and Form C (regarding a web site that the participant would never choose to buy from) (table II).

Each section of the survey contained different types of questions. Section I included questions about demographics and user attitudes towards online shopping and previous experience with the Internet. There were questions about the three main motives for shopping or not shopping online (Table V) and participants were also asked to indicate in a five-point Likert scale the perceived importance of the five WE factors on their choice of online vendors (Table III).

Table III. Importance of WE Factors for online users on choice of a virtual vendor (%)

WE factors (*)	Very important 5		4		3		2		Not important 1	
	SP	NL	SP	NL	SP	NL	SP	NL	SP	NL
Usability	36	22	47	53	11	22	6	2	0	0
Interactivity	19	5	46	35	23	46	10	12	1	2
Trust	76	81	19	18	3	1	1	0	5	0
Aesthetics	15	8	48	34	22	41	12	15	2	1
Mk Mix	55	26	34	47	9	16	2	5	0	6

(*) The explanation of five WE factors is showed in table VI
Note: SP-Spain NL-The Netherlands

In general participants consider all five the WE elements as relevant dimensions of their choice for online shops.

In Section II (A, B, and C forms) participants had to indicate whether they were agree or disagree with statements related to their impressions about the three web sites (The one where they “bought” the digital camera, the one that they considered as good enough alternative and the site they would never buy). They had to indicate their experience on 25 individual characteristics making up the five components of the WE: Usability, Interactivity, Trust, Aesthetics and Marketing Mix.

5. MAIN RESULTS

5.1. Descriptive data

A summary of the most important demographics and behavioral characteristics of the participants per country are illustrated in table IV.

Table IV. Descriptive data

	SPAIN	THE NETHERLANDS
Gender	Female: 63% Male: 37%	Female: 29% Male: 71%
Age	18-22	20-25
Experience with the Internet (more of four years)	34%	84%
Purchase through the Internet	31%	77%
Money spent (between 50-100€)	15%	21%

Participants with previous online shopping experience had to indicate the three most important motives for shopping online choosing them from a master list. Likewise, those without online shopping record had to indicate the three most important reasons for not buying any goods or services in the Internet. The results, by preference order, are illustrated in table V. Interestingly the main motives to buy products online in the two counties are quite similar (two of the three are the same on both countries).

Table V. Reasons for shopping or not shopping products in the Internet by participants (according to the rankings obtained)

	SPAIN	THE NETHERLANDS
Not buy online products	1. Shopping other channels 2. Lack of physical contact 3. Follow up concerns (complaints/returns/problems)	1. Lack of physical contact 2. Shopping other channels 3. Lack of trust for online vendors
To buy online products	1. Find better prices 2. Easier price comparison 3. Find more products	1. Find better prices 2. Saving time 3. Easier price comparison

Twenty five different brands of digital cameras in Spain and forty-five in The Netherlands were “bought” by the participants including a large variety of models.

The subjective opinions for all participants (Spanish and Dutch users) as to the influence of the five WE elements on the choice for online vendors (Table III) are similar. However, there are also some differences between both countries:

- While Trust is considered as very important factor in both countries, the Marketing Mix is considered by Spanish users as very important (together with Trust); Dutch participants consider the Marketing Mix as the second most important factor.
- Usability, Interactivity, and Aesthetics elements are considered by Spanish participants as the second most important elements. Dutch consumers also consider Usability as the second most important WE factor while the rest (Interactivity and Aesthetics) are perceived as less important.

5.2. Statistical results: Users’ preferences in the choice of e-vendor

The three web sites chosen by users (the site where they bought the camera, the site of their second choice and the site where they would never buy a camera online) were compared on the basis of the responses on 25 questions per site referring to the particular components of the WE elements on the basis of a 5-point Likert scale. In order to test the hypotheses, a factor analysis was carried out to reduce the number of WE items. The five factors obtained are shown in table VI.

Table VI. Factor analysis: A comparison

ITEMS	Factors									
	Usability		Interactivity		Trust		Aesthetics		Marketing Mix	
	SP	NL	SP	NL	SP	NL	SP	NL	SP	NL
Convenient to buy products (q1)	.64	.63								
Navigation is simple (q2)	.74	.64								
Information easily accessible (q3)	.67	.62								
Ordering process is simple (q4)	.52	.56								
Good internal search facilities (q5)	.50	.52								
Pages are loading very fast (q6)	.33	.30								
Little search effort (q7)	.38	.19								
Excellent customer service (q8)			.37	.20						
Shop's staff is easy (q9)			.52	.25						
Excellent search customization (q10)			.56	.80						
Other customers' experiences (q11)			.23	.39						
Safety of online transactions (q12)					.65	.71				
Protection of customer's personal data (q13)					.71	.85				
Guarantees against misuse of personal data for commercial purposes (q14)					.68	.79				
Logos of organizations that guarantee secure online shopping (q15)					.49	.35				
Transparent guarantee policy (q16)					.51	.61				
Site's design is superb (q17)							.65	.74		
High site's presentation quality (q18)							.71	.78		
Site's design is unique innovative elements (q19)							.55	.61		
Good online shop's atmosphere (q20)							.50	.63		
Communication with customer is a professional way (q21)									.17	.10
Wide and deep product assortment (q22)									.26	.30
Very reliable fulfillment process (q23)									.13	.14
Very competitive prices (q24)									.66	.57
Very attractive promotions (q25)									.63	.79
Eigen values of factors	9.51	2.26	1.07	1.24	1.63	8.87	1.25	1.55	.98	1.14
% explained variance	38.03	9.06	4.31	4.98	6.53	35.5	5.02	6.21	3.94	4.57
Cronbach Alpha	0,83	0,82	0,67	0,67	0,81	0,81	0,82	0,87	0,77	0,72
Factor Analysis statistics	Spain					The Netherlands				
Explained variance	57.85%					60.39%				
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin sample adaptation measurement (Bartlett's Test of Sphericity signification)	.94 (sig., .000)					.96 (sig., .000)				

According to table VI, in both cases, the variables associated with each WE factor are the same (e.g. Constantinides and Geurts, 2005) but there are differences In the case of the Eigen values. Specifically, the highest one in the Dutch study is related to Trust (8.87) while in the Spanish study it is related to Usability (9.51). The total explained variance is quite similar (approximately 60%). Reliability and validity analysis indicate in both studies an outstanding fit of the data to each factorial group through the Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach, 1951) and Composite Reliability Index whose values are higher than 0.7 per factorial group (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994; Fornell and Larcker, 1981, respectively). Average Variance Extracted values are higher than 0.5 per factorial group and higher than covariance square (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

A binomial logistic regression was executed with the five WE factors per website as independent variables and the purchasing behavior as the dichotomous dependent variable (i.e. buy/not buying). The users' buying preferences regarding the WE elements and the influence of their personal characteristics can be seen in tables VII and VIII.

Table VII. Consumer's purchase preference from WE factors

Dependent variable (buy/not buying)		Consumer Preference	
Hypotheses		H1 (a, b, c, d, e)	
Countries comparison		SPAIN	NETHERLANDS
Nagelkerke		.34	.31
Hoshmer Lemeshow		14.99 (8)	48.89 (8)
WE Factors – H1 (Independent variables)	a: Usability	1.29 (.15)*	.74 (.22)*
	b: Interactivity	.19 (.13)	-.27 (.20)
	c: Trust	.55 (.11)*	.24 (.18)
	d: Aesthetics	.47 (.12)*	.11 (.20)
	e: Mk Mix	.54 (.13)*	.55 (.22)*
<i>Legend:</i> · Proxies of standardized regression parameters are presented in the cells. · Asterisk (*) indicates statistical significance on 5% level (i.e. confidence level: 95%). · Standard errors between brackets.			

Table VIII. Influence of personal characteristics on consumer's purchase preference

Dependent variable (buy/not buying)		Consumer Preference			
Hypotheses		H2a		H2b,c	
Countries comparison		SP	NL	SP	NL
Nagelkerke		.46	.33	.35	.48
Hoshmer Lemeshow		7.95 (8)	34.57 (8)	9.80 (8)	11.06 (8)
WE Factors (Independent variables)	Usability	1.82(.37)*	.74 (.22)*	1.34 (.15)*	1.07 (.26)*
	Interactivity	-.56 (.28)	-.28 (.20)	.18 (.13)	-.36 (.21)
	Trust	.96 (.21)*	.23 (.18)	.58 (.12)*	.35 (.20)
	Aesthetics	.72 (.26)*	.12 (.20)	.47 (.12)*	.16 (.22)
	Mk Mix	.71 (.25)*	.56 (.21)*	.55 (.13)*	.72 (.25)*
Main Motive – H2 (Independent variable)	a: To find better prices **	-.15 (.40)	-.76 (.39)*		
Experience – H2 (Independent variable)	b: Years of Internet usage			-.11 (.07)	-.26 (.09)*
	c: Familiarity with online shopping			-.18 (.22)	.11 (.31)

Legend:

- Proxies of standardized regression parameters are presented in the cells.
- Asterisk (*) indicates statistical significance on 5% level (i.e. confidence level: 95%).
- Standard errors between brackets.
- Double asterisk (**) indicates that “to find better prices” is the motive to buy online with the highest impact. So, the rest of the identified motives are not reported in this table. In both countries that variable has been the most selected reason by participants.

Based on the results the hypotheses were evaluated as follows:

H1: The effect of the WE elements (a:Usability, b:Interactivity, c:Trust, d:Aesthetics, e:Marketing Mix) on Spanish and Dutch consumers when choosing an online vendor is dissimilar.

As can be seen in table VII Usability and Marketing Mix have a positive and significant influence on consumer decisions in both countries. Therefore *H1a* and *H1e* are rejected. Regarding this point, it is important to notice the behavior of statistical coefficients –beta parameters– in both cases. Specifically, regarding the Marketing Mix factor, parameters are similar (Spanish .54 versus Dutch .55). However, the Usability factor has a higher influence on the Spanish customer's choice (i.e. Spanish 1.29 versus Dutch .74). These results indicate that usability elements like site navigation, downloading speed, convenience, information architecture, etc., are more relevant for the Spanish users who are less experienced with the Internet than the Dutch users (see table IV). The Trust and Aesthetics have a significant

influence on the Spanish users but not over the Dutch consumer; therefore *H1c* and *H1d* can not be rejected because the effect of these factors on the two groups is quite dissimilar.

According to descriptive data (table IV), the majority of Spanish participants have limited previous Internet experience and online purchasing. The experience of the Dutch participants is higher (i.e. 84% versus 34%, and 77% versus 31%, respectively). Consequently, we can conclude that web aspects such as Aesthetics and Trust are considered less relevant by more experienced web shoppers (i.e. the Dutch consumers). Less experienced shoppers expect more positive cues and information to be provided by online stores –such as high presentation quality, good atmosphere, safety in e-transactions, transparent guarantee policy, and so on– in order to choose an e-vendor. The more cautious behavior of the Spanish consumer could be also related to the cultural characteristics of this group: According to Hofstede’s cultural dimensions classification (table I), the “uncertainty avoidance” is higher in Spain (80 versus 53 in The Netherlands). This fact could be translated in web design terms as a necessity for more online visual stimuli, clear processes allowing for efficiently completing the purchase task and cues minimizing the perceived risk of online shopping. Another factor presumably contributing to these differences is the higher percentage of female participants in the Spanish survey. Female Spanish online shoppers tend to avoid uncertainty in online shopping to a higher degree than Spanish males (Goldsmith and Bridges, 2000; Brown et al., 2003). Additionally, in both cases (Trust and Aesthetics factors), the regression parameters are higher in the Spanish survey (Trust: .55 versus .24; Aesthetics: .47 versus .11). This fact additionally explains the higher impact of both web factors on Spanish population.

According to regression parameters, in both cases the Interactivity factor is not significant for the online vendor choice. Therefore the *H1b* is rejected. However, looking to the statistical coefficients (table VII) it is interesting to point out the different behavior and low

regression value of that factor in both studies. Specifically, in the Spanish case we can find a direct relationship between Interactivity elements and consumer's preferences while in the Dutch study the relationship is indirect (.19 versus -.27). These results indicate the low impact that web elements related to Interactivity factor (possibility of interaction with personnel, interaction with other buyers, etc.) have on Spanish users. In the case of Dutch users, the effect of that factor is even negative leading to the interesting conclusion that Dutch shoppers avoid highly interactive web sites when buying standardized products online. These effects are again in line with Hofstede (1997 and 2001) –table I– indicating that the cultural dimension of “individualism” in The Netherlands is higher than in Spain (i.e. 80 versus 45); the Dutch do not seem to feel the need to interact with staff or other users during virtual shopping.

According to the above results it can be argued that differences between distinctive cultural groups in the physical world (Usunier, 1996; Mooij de, 1998 and 2003b) are not reflected in the virtual behavior of these groups. The Internet community tends to establish similar behavioral patterns in searching and purchasing online although in some countries the impact of specific web elements can be higher than in other countries due to difference in experience with the Internet and possibly due to some specific cultural characteristics.

H2: The personal characteristics of Spanish and Dutch consumers (a: Motives towards online shopping, b: Years of Internet experience, c: Familiarity with online shopping) will affect the choice of an online vendor in diverse ways

As for as the “motives towards online shopping”, the variable related to “to find better prices” was chosen by the majority of participants in both studies as the main reason for shopping online (table VIII). Nevertheless, if we observe the results more closely, some noteworthy differences emerge. In the case of Spanish study, the independent variable “motives towards online shopping” is not significant within the model, but improves the

results (see statistical coefficients of WE factors in table VII and table VIII). In the Dutch study, this variable has a significant effect within the model, but does not produce any improvement to WE results. In both cases its effect is nil. In conclusion, the coefficients for this factor are negative in both countries. There appears to be inconsistency in reporting this finding and consequently in the logic of rejecting hypothesis *H2a*.

Regarding the independent variables “years Internet usage” and “familiarity with online shopping”, table VIII shows dissimilar results between both countries. In the Spanish case, both variables have no significant direct or indirect effect on WE factors. Moreover, the differences between the beta coefficients before and after their inclusion in the model are not significant, especially in the Spanish study. However, in the Dutch study, their effect is significant and with a higher indirect effect than the Spanish study. This suggests that extensive experience with the Internet reduces the role of web elements in online retailing (table VIII). In fact, the inclusion of these internal variables in the model improves the results in all WE factors mainly in the Usability and Marketing Mix elements (Usability NL: from 0,74 to 1,07; Trust NL: from 0,23 to 0,35; Aesthetics NL: from 0,12 to 0,16; Marketing Mix NL: from 0,56 to 0,72; Usability SP: from 1,82 to 1,34; Trust SP: from 0,96 to 0,58; Aesthetics SP: from 0,72 to 0,47; Marketing Mix SP: from 0,71 to 0,55). Additionally, according to descriptive data (table III) the experience with the Internet use by Spanish participants is lower than in the Dutch case. In this context, *H2b* and *H2c* cannot be rejected.

According to Internet World Stats (2008), the percentage of the Internet penetration in The Netherlands is higher than in Spain (87.8% versus 56.5%). In fact, in this study has been found that the Dutch shopper’s web experience is more influenced by the Usability and Marketing Mix of web sites while personal variables do not show significant effect on the appreciation of the other three factors (i.e. Interactivity, Trust, and Aesthetics) (see table VIII). In this sense, it is also relevant that the “uncertainty avoidance” cultural dimension

(Hofstede, 1997; 2001) –table I– could exercise some influence in the shopper’s behavior: Spanish people might prefer to avoid the uncertainty to online shopping. Furthermore, according to the indirect effect shown in the data (table VIII), they prefer to be more intensively exposed to WE elements in the online stores in order to carry out a purchase more efficiently.

Finally, regarding the variable we called “experience” (i.e. years Internet usage and familiarity with online purchase) in the Spanish study, the “familiarity with online purchase” item affects more than “years of Internet usage” the consumer’s preferences for choosing a virtual vendor, but the inclusion of this variable does not improve the model. In contrast, in Dutch study, the variable with more influence on e-vendor choice is “years of Internet usage”. Nevertheless, in both studies, the general variable “experience” influences the consumers’ preferences in a negative way: More experienced users consider the Usability and Marketing Mix elements as less important. The same is true for the rest of the WE elements.

6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

When new technologies become available and cultures adopt them, the result can be either convergence (ie. cultures are becoming more similar as a result) or divergence, when different cultures react to technologies in ways that maintain or even further accentuate their differences (Zahir et al., 2002).

The scope of this paper is to identify differences and similarities in the buying behavior of Internet shoppers from two European countries with different cultural background. In this context, the study identifies the main differences between perceptions of e-consumers as to the factors affecting their buying behavior and the actual factors influencing their behavior. The study identifies and compares the way different online experience (or WE) factors affect

the decision-making process and the final purchasing behavior regarding the product and vendor choice in an Internet shopping context.

The study can be a starting point for further research into intra-cultural differences in virtual buying behavior, considering the increasing importance of the Internet as a global marketing platform. Online vendors and web designers should be aware of such cultural differences in designing global virtual stores that address different cultural segments and different customers (e.g. different languages, different products, etc.). The specific design elements based on intra-cultural differences must be recognizable by the target audience, yet subtle enough not to cause confusion to different consumers in the world or compromise the objective of presenting brands and products in a uniform and integral manner in the web (Nielsen and Tahir, 2001; Nielsen, 2003). The study reports some differences but also a lot of similarities in the way *e-users* from both countries consider how the WE factors affect their decisions. We expect that increasing globalization and increasing adoption of the Internet worldwide will decrease rather than increase these differences.

With regard to the rest of the study findings, it is interesting to mention that personal characteristics like experience with the Internet use apparently affect the online shoppers in the two countries in different ways: The more experience Dutch users are less sensitive to WE elements such as Aesthetics and Trust. In contrast, because Spanish people have less experience with the Internet, these factors are important influencers on their e-vendor choice. Regarding the familiarity with the online purchase dimension, in both cases, it is not a relevant dimension affecting the consumer's preferences to choose a virtual store. Furthermore, in both countries the specific motives for buying or not buying products on the Internet do not influence the buying decisions.

The global convergence and standardization provide corporations with unique opportunities and reduce the adaptation cost of doing business overseas. However, ignoring completely the

cultural differences between countries or territories can be a mistake if this comes about too early or it is too far reaching. In this sense, Zahir et al. (2002) argue that while most national portals closely resemble the basic structure of an original free full-service website like Yahoo!, there are also differences in appearance and features offered that can be attributed to cultural variations based on Hofstede's framework (see too Singh et al, 2004). Marketers must analyze aspects such as types of products, consumers' tastes, preference patterns, customer sophistication etc., in order to choose for adaptation or standardization (Usunier, 1996; Mooij de, 1998 and 2003b). Despite cultural diversity, the online buying behavior in the context of this study is characterized by many similarities that could indicate the emergence of a global virtual village that becomes more and more coherent the higher the penetration of the Internet will be in all countries in the future (Chau et al., 2002). Cole et al. (2000) feel cultural differences do not affect on-line retailers' ability to attract and retain customers, arguing that established on-line stores such as Amazon are globally successful using a standardized customer interface. Such a development will have substantial implications not only for global web vendors and web site designers but also for further scientific research. In fact, according to the analysis of cross-country lifestyles, current tendencies are directed toward a convergence of consumer behavior and in consequence standardization will be a strategy winning ground in the future (Mooij de, 1998).

The study indicates that an important implication for e-marketers is that the elements related to usability (e.g. easy navigation, simple order process, fast load of pages etc.) as well as aspects related to trust (i.e. guarantees and transaction safety), marketing mix elements (e.g. attractive promotions, competitive prices, product assortment etc.) or aesthetics (i.e. site's design and presentation) form the core aspects of a successful online presence at least in the countries studied. Future research to more countries with even more distinctive cultural differences should follow up before one can generalize these findings.

7. CONCLUSIONS

As major conclusions we could point out that this work presents a comparative view about the influence of WE factors on consumer's responses in Spain and The Netherlands. From an individual perspective the results of the Spanish survey indicate that four of the five WE elements clearly affect many online shopper preferences. In the Dutch case two of the WE factors, namely the Usability and Marketing Mix seem to have a substantial effect on online shoppers' preferences. Another similarity is that in both countries, the factor Interactivity has not been found to have substantial influence on the choice of an e-vendor.

A possible explanation of the observed behavioral differences these could be related to the degree of experience with the Internet medium but also to cultural and behavioral differences between both countries. Dutch consumers have on the average a longer experience with the Internet. They are more individualist and are characterized by less risk aversion (Hofstede, 1997 and 2001). Those characteristics seem to be related to their focus on the WE elements like Usability and Marketing Mix in comparison to the Spanish users who need more cues in order to make a choice.

As main limitations, we must consider that the study was conducted with a very specific scope, namely to identify and compare the influence of online experience factors on the choice of an online vendor in two different countries. The conclusions apply only to purchasing processes regarding a high-involvement, yet reasonably standardized product. This means that the findings are limited to transactional sites selling this particular type of products and do not necessarily apply to transactional sites selling customizable products or web sites with other than transactional scope (i.e. promotional, relational, educational or purely informational sites). We must also underline the fact that the sample size and composition differs for the two studies. In both cases the reliability and validity levels are

acceptable and, consequently the sample size does not affect the results and the results are comparable.

In the Spanish sample the female percentage is higher than in the Dutch sample. Considering that female online buyers have been found as perceiving online shopping as more risky than males (Goldsmith and Bridges, 2000) this could explain the observed higher impact of uncertainty-reducing elements like trust, aesthetics and marketing mix on the choice of online vendors by Spanish consumers. For standardized products, cultural considerations may be less important factors in product choice. Cultural considerations are more likely to play a significant role where the product is unique or customized. Nevertheless, the objective of this study is focused on the analysis of the influence of websites as a collection of WE factors on the choice of an e-vendor; the key objective of this study is to contribute knowledge useful for website design in global settings.

Looking to more recent trends in research, one can observe a growing interest around online Marketing and particularly about the effects of one of the WE dimensions (see for example, Dailey, 2004; Eroglu et al., 2003; Lindgaard et al., 2006; Tractinsky et al., 2006). We suggest that future research should analyze the e-consumers' perceptions about aesthetics aspects of the online store (i.e. good or bad design) in order to further understand the role of aesthetics on the online consumer behavior, something that will provide e-vendors with more information and concrete suggestions as to increasing the impact of their web sites. Finally, it could be interesting to complement this empirical research including the study of relationships between variables through the use of a structural equations model approach in order to analyze the impact of WE factors on choosing of e-vendor by users, attending to consumer's intrinsic and extrinsic variables as mediator items.

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Efthymios Constantinides

Brief bio: Studied Economics in Athens and followed post graduate studies in Economics of European Integration in Amsterdam. Received his PhD in virtual Marketing in the University of Twente. After a corporate career of ten years he worked for 10 years as senior lecturer Marketing for the International Agricultural College Larenstein, (The Netherlands) and since 2001 works as Assistant Professor Marketing / E-Media at the School of Management and Governance of the University of Twente (The Netherlands). His research is focused on marketing in virtual environments and the effects of New Media on customer behavior

Carlota Lorenzo

Brief Bio: Graduated and Doctor of Business from University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain). Currently she is an Assistant Professor of Marketing in University of Castilla-La Mancha. Her research area is focused on new information and communication technologies, store atmosphere, e-merchandising, consumer behavior, experimental designs, and marketing research. She has participated in some international and national conferences and he has published some papers in national journals and books.

Miguel A. Gómez

Brief Bio: Graduated in Business from University of Valencia (Spain), and Doctor of Business from University of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain). Nowadays, he is a lecturer of Marketing in University of Castilla-La Mancha. His research area is focused on different aspects of consumer behavior like the impact of new information and communication technologies, e-commerce, experimental designs, and new virtual interaction environments. He has participated in relevant international and national conferences and he has published some papers in journals such as *Journal of retailing and consumer services*, *Esic Market*, *Revista Española de Investigación de Marketing- Esic*, and several international and national books.

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