

SOCIAL PRESENCE FOR ONLINE SHOPPING SUCCESS: A REVIEW AND AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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Abstract

One significant difference between online and offline shopping environments is that the offline shopping experience encompasses a wide range of emotions involving various types of interactions with humans through multiple sensory channels (sight, sound, smell and touch). This social multi-sensory interaction defines the experience where “malls have become entertainment centers with communities” (Kumar and Benbasat 2002). The online shopping experience, on the other hand, is primarily geared towards reducing the user’s cognitive burden through functional and performance-based Website design heuristics. As such, electronic commerce may be viewed as being more impersonal, anonymous and automated than traditional person-to-person commerce. Consumers who use the Internet to purchase items are mostly faced with product images and descriptions that are displayed with little or no emotional appeal. Such products are usually accompanied by descriptions that are functional, attribute-based, and at the very least, unemotional. In sum, the online shopping experience tends to lack the richness and sociability that is associated with offline shopping.

Social presence has been defined by researchers as a sense of human warmth or sociability (Rice and Case, 1983; Steinfield, 1986; Yoo and Alavi, 2001). This sense of human warmth and sociability can be instilled via actual interactions with other humans or by stimulating the imagination of interacting with other humans. In an online shopping context, actual interactions with other humans may be incorporated through means such as online chats (Kumar and Benbasat 2002), virtual communities (Kumar and Benbasat, 2002), and human web assistants (Hostler et al., 2005). These interactions may be synchronous or asynchronous, but the response must be generated by another human. In contrast, simulated interactions are generated by a computer without direct human intervention. Website features that may instill a sense of social presence through imaginary interactions include socially-rich text content (Hassanein and Head 2005/6; Hassanein and Head 2007), socially-rich picture content (Cyr et al. 2009; Hassanein and Head 2005/6; Hassanein and Head 2007), personalized greetings (Gefen and Straub, 2003), and recommendation/intelligent agents (Serenko et al. 2006; Choi et al. 2011).

Using the Zhang and Li (2005) framework to conceptualize human-computer interaction (HCI) issues, we review a body of research completed by the authors (Hassanein and Head 2005/2006; Hassanein and Head 2007; Hassanein et al. 2009; Cyr et al. 2007; Cyr et al. 2009) that has examined how social presence can be instilled into the web interface across contexts (e.g. cultural differences), humans (e.g. gender differences) and tasks (e.g. product differences). This framework is used to outline promising areas for future research in this important domain. Additionally, a methodological lens is added to the research framework to provide insights into the appropriateness and value of varied methodologies to explore the social presence phenomenon. Generalizations will be made on how such a framework can be used to guide HCI researchers in developing rich and complete research agendas that have both academic rigor and practitioner relevance.

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