

Research Note

Media Richness and Internet Exploration

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ABSTRACT

Previous research found that media richness is associated with positive evaluation of a web site. An experiment was carried out where participants were instructed to explore a web site presenting a popular town: Venice. According to a random distribution, participants were exposed (or not) to street-sounds when exploring the web site and had the possibility to control (or not) the photography (using a 360° navigation with their mouse) displayed on the web site. Results shown that higher evaluation were associated with sounds and mouse-control. Theory of media richness was used to explain our results and the managerial application for tourism was discussed. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Interactivity and vividness have been extensively studied in the field of computer-mediated communication but empirical studies exploring the effect of interactivity and vividness of a website are scarce. Previous experiments have shown that control and media richness are associated with a higher evaluation of a website. Klein (2003) had tested the construct of telepresence, a sense of presence in a remote environment, to examine the process by which media characteristics influence consumer response. She found that user control and media richness both contribute to the creation of a sense of telepresence and influenced consumer's cognitive responses like higher realism scores and positive evaluation of the website. Sewak *et al.* (2005) instructed their subjects to evaluate a website to present a new pharmaceutical product designed with high visual appeal (the website was designed with a picture including a picture of a seashore below the overhang of a tree and the subject headings of the sections of the website were placed in buttons that permitted the participants to explore the relevant section) or low aspects of visual appeal (the website was designed with text but no picture and no buttons were present and it was possible for the participants to navigate in the various sections of the website through hyperactive links).

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The results showed that the website with the picture received high evaluations in terms of visual appeal and pleasantness. It was also perceived as more attractive and prettier than the website with text. Higher quality was also associated with the website with the picture.

The later studies were focused on the evaluation of the website and were not focused on the evaluation of information contained in the website (i.e. a product presented on the website). Our experimental interest was to test the effect of the two factors (media richness and control) manipulated by Klein (2003) on the evaluation of the information presented on the website and on behavioral intention toward this information. An experiment was carried out to test the effect of such factors on a tourism product.

METHOD

Seventy-nine undergraduate students were instructed to explore a website presenting a highly popular town: Venice. Six famous areas of Venice were presented in the website with the help of high resolution photographs. According to four experimental conditions, participants were exposed (or not) to street sounds (the sounds of footsteps, pigeon cooing, hushed conversations of passers-by, etc.) when exploring the website and had the possibility to control (or not) the photography by using 360° navigation with their mouse. Then, after exploring the website, a questionnaire was submitted to the participant that evaluated the website with the help of five questions, all using a 7-point semantic differential scale. Each scale began like this: 'The navigation was: unexciting/exciting, boring/interesting, unpleasant/pleasant, and difficult/easy'. A later question was used to evaluate the interest of the participant toward Venice: 'After viewing some areas of Venice, evaluate on the given scale the probability of your visiting this town in the future: no probability/high probability'.

RESULTS

Data analysis showed that the website was evaluated to be more exciting when street

noises were displayed during the exploration of the site and when 360° navigation was possible. Furthermore, no interaction effect was found between the two independent variables. When street noises were displayed during navigation on the website, the site was perceived to be more pleasant and easier to use. No further effect was found and no difference according to the experimental condition manipulated was found when interest toward the site was evaluated by the participants. For the behavioral intention, displaying street noises during navigation increased the probability of visiting the town. Again, no effect of the presence versus absence of 360° navigation was found and no interaction between the two independent variables appeared when analysing this dependant variable.

CONCLUSION AND INTEREST

Our results showed that media richness and user control had a significant positive influence on the evaluation of a website intended to increase the value of a town. These results confirm and extend the results obtain by Klein (2003) who also found that a website was perceived as more realistic and was associated to positive attributes when control and media richness were displayed. We then confirmed these results by using a new methodology to increase some feelings of telepresence in a website. Furthermore, our results extend Klein's results because we have found that media richness and control had a positive effect on behavioral intention toward the product presented on the website. This experiment was important to conduct because the results highlighted that the same information about a town can have differential effects when this information is or is not accompanied by contextual cues such as street sounds.

Such results have some managerial interest because we found that when information corresponding to a natural perception of a real place is present on a website, a positive evaluation of the site is found and the attractiveness of the place increases. It would then be interesting for a webmaster who manages website that promotes a town or a tourist destination

to introduce such natural information onto them. Many applications are possible in this domain. It could be interesting to add the sound of waves when promoting a seaside spot. In France, where our above-presented experiment was carried out, groups of people stay on a farm for a weekend during the summer holidays. Such a stay, which is called 'welcome to the farm' or 'a farmer's stay' is frequently reserved through websites. Therefore, it could be lucrative for the farmer to record the sounds of his/her farm such as farmyard animals or insect chirping and to

include these sounds on his/her website in order to create positive evocation and perhaps increase a more genuine farm effect.

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