How Does User's Learning Style Impact the Effectiveness of Online Customer Service?

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Abstract

National culture determines the shared learning style of its people. In a particular culture, people may learn best when content is made of videos, graphs, pictures, charts. In another culture they learn better by talking, discussing and chatting. In another culture, by reading and writing, and in other cultures by experimenting and practicing. At the same time, transactional web sites assume a static customer learning style. The design of the site usually reflects the designer's learning style and cognitive style which in turn reflects the learning style type of people in particular culture. However, the sharp increase number of transactional web sites draw the attention and the focus of management to the quality and the effectiveness of customer service web pages. We argue that the fit between the design of the content of customer service pages with the customer's learning style may increase online customer service effectiveness.

Keywords: Learning styles, online customer service, culture

Introduction

National culture determines the shared learning style of its people. In a particular culture, people may learn best when content is made of videos, graphs, pictures, charts. In another culture they learn better by talking, discussing and chatting. In another culture, by reading and writing, and in other cultures by experimenting. At the same time online businesses assume a static customer learning style. The design of the site usually reflects the designer's learning style and cognitive styles which in turn reflect the learning style type of people in that particular culture. However, the sharp increase number of transactional web sites and the increase cost of customer service management, management shifted their attention and their focus to the quality and the effectiveness of customer service pages. We argue that the fit between

the design of the site's content with the customer's learning style may increase online service effectiveness. The article is structured as follows. First, an overview of the theoretical background of the major concepts that make up the research model is presented, followed by a detailed discussion on the research model. Finally the article concludes with implications for practice and future research.

Literature Review
Learning styles

Information processing, cognitive processing styles, and learning styles have been used interchangeably in the literature. Leonard et, al (1999) argues that information processing styles often termed cognitive styles has gained prominence in the organizational behavior literature, as researchers use it to study decision making behavior, conflict, strategy development, and group processes. He defined cognitive styles as "the way in which people process and organize information and arrive at judgments or conclusion based on their observation". The concept is so vague that it has been conceptualized from different point of views. From decision making perspective, Soane (2015) claims that information processing style can be defined as how decisions are made. The author added that information processing styles typically characterized as tendencies to use analytical or intuitive approaches to influence decision processes and outcomes.

It becomes clear that information processing and cognitive processing are processes that help an individual receive information, process it, memorize it and ultimately take actions accordingly. On the other hand, the concept of learning style can be better referred to as the mechanism by which an individual builds intrinsic knowledge not necessarily for decision making. Messick (1976) combines all of these concepts and argues "different learners have different cognitive styles and information processing strategies that determine a learner's typical mode of perceiving, remembering, thinking, and problem solving".

In this article, we use the concept of learning style to explain our theory. We believe that after an individual receives information, he or she interprets the information in such a way that fits his/her cognitive style and produces specific meaning to his/her interpretation.

Fleming and Mills (1992) have developed an inventory of learning styles known as VARK. Visual (V), aural (A), read write (R), and kinesthetic (K). The authors argue that people have different learning styles. Some people may learn best by watching, others by listening, others by reading and writing and, others by experimenting.

People with visual preference learn best from presentations that use graphs, charts, diagrams, and videos. Aural learners prefer receiving

information through listening. Read/write learners prefer to process information through writing and reading from printed words. Kinesthetic learners gain better understanding of materiel through concrete examples and applications.

National Culture

Culture is a term that was originally developed in the field of anthropology and has recently become a prevalent research area in organizational studies. Unfortunately, a consistent definition of this ambiguous concept is extremely difficult to isolate (Lammers and Hickson,1979). The complexity of the concept of culture derives then from the multiplicity of the perspectives that investigate it. One thing all researchers agree upon is the fact that culture is related to people. In 1952, the anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckholn claimed that there were more than 150 definitions of the concept of culture. Baligh (1994) also argues that there are many ways to describe and define culture and that one may conceive of culture in terms of its parts and its components, and the two are related. Culture concerns a group of people who share a common understanding and meaning of things around them. It is a shared system of meaning (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998) or, the collective programming of the human mind that distinguishes members of one group from another (Hofstede, 1993). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) propose the following model to understand culture.
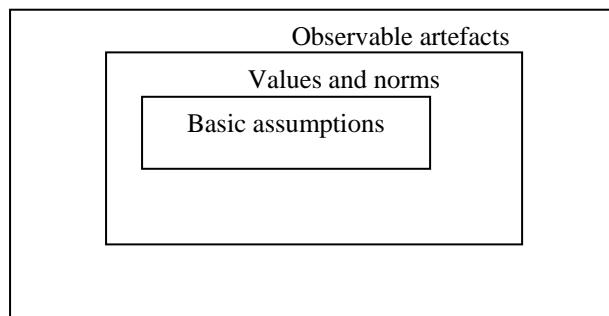

Figure 1: Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) cultural model.

The above model indicates that the products of a culture (observable artefacts) are symbols of the norms and values of the people, which in turn are based on fundamental basic assumptions about human existence and life. National culture is a major type of culture.

National culture is a concept that helps determine similarities and differences between the cultures of the countries.

The literature provides some models which try to capture the concept of national culture. Hall (1976) uses a single dimension; high context versus

low context to differentiate between national cultures. High-context cultures (including much of the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America) are relational, and collectivist. People in these cultures emphasize interpersonal relationships. According to Hall (1976), these cultures are collectivist, preferring group harmony and consensus to individual achievement. Explicit information is not as important as context, which might include the speaker's tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, and posture. Low-context cultures (including North America and much of Western Europe) are logical, linear, individualistic, and action-oriented. People from low-context cultures value logic, facts, and directness. Decisions are based on fact rather than intuition.

Hofstede (1993) proposes a multidimensional model and suggests that national culture and values, as they affect the work environment and its management, could be categorized on the basis of four dimensions, namely: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism–collectivism, and masculinity-femininity.

The values of people in a particular culture are the most widely used concept or variable in cross-cultural studies (Glenn and Glenn, 1981; Hofstede, 1993). The reason for the popularity of values as cross-cultural research variables is the deeper layer of culture; basic assumptions are preconscious (taken for granted) and are powerful because they are less debatable than espoused values. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) suggest differentiating between norms and values in claiming that values direct our feelings of good and evil, and that norms are the basis by which a group of people judge something as right or wrong.

Online customer service

The internet has established itself as a tool that impacted people's lifestyles, organizational models, and the society in general. The Internet became a vital tool that changed the world. It provides large amount of information in a very short amount of time. It pushes people to change the way they normally purchase goods and services. In the last five years, the number of Internet users doubled worldwide. For over two billion people, the internet is now a part of their lifestyle (Nielsen, 2010). Recent research reports that 89% of American adults use the Internet, and 72% of now own a smartphone (Pouchter, 2016).

Electronic commerce of all types is expanding exponentially due to sharp decrease in the cost of information technology and the severe competiveness in the market. This growth in Electronic commerce has automatically pushed managers to pay attention to customer service pages in order to lower its cost and make it more effective. Customer service includes pre-transaction service, transaction service and post-transaction service. Many organizations understood that their survivor depends mainly on how they treat

their customers. They understand that a quality customer service is a key factor for a company to succeed. Online customer service processes differ substantially from the traditional face-to-face customer service. IT offers the ability to attract, maintain and search for customers. Virtually all brick and mortar and online businesses use IT to service their customers. Industry watchers note that customer preference for phone support is dropping, while email and chat are becoming more popular options (Klie, 2013). Online customer service system has become an important tool of online marketing. However many organizations fail to offer satisfactory service online.

Research Model

The following model was built to propose our hypotheses and research assumptions.
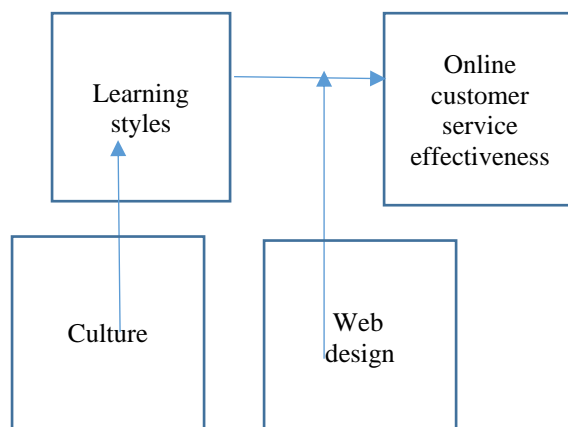

Figure 2: Research model

The model suggests that national culture shapes the learning style of its people. In other words, for example, it is very likely that German people would share a common learning style, that is the way people process information and make decisions. The relationship between the learning style and online customer service effectiveness, which is moderated by the web design variable indicates that when a user browses the customer service page on the web site trying to find solutions or answers to his/her request, he/she will be confronted with specific contents and specific logic (web site design). If the site design does not match or support the way the user process information, the later may exit the site and this would impact the overall effectiveness of customer service. If on the other hand the site's design matches the users common information processing or learning style, the user would likely use minimum cognitive efforts to find answers to his/her questions and this would highly ameliorate the overall customer effectiveness.

A UX (User Experience) experimentation can be used to empirically test our hypotheses. Two groups of people from different cultures can be selected to participate in the experiment. We can use people from China and USA or Canada for example. We already know that these cultures are very different. North American culture is very individualistic and low-context whereas Chinese culture is more collectivist and high-context. We design two versions of the same web site. Each version matches and reflects the learning style of each group. The experiment can be done is two stages. In stage one, each group will be asked to browse the version of the web site that does not reflect its learning style. In stage two, each group will be asked to browse the appropriate version. Data between stage one and stage two can be compared to check if our hypotheses are confirmed.

Implication for practice

The moment an enterprise launches a web site, it become international. People from around the work may browse its pages. To increase customer service effectiveness, we recommend that the contents of the customer service site be designed in four different versions where each version matches each of VARK learning styles. Each time a user accesses the customer service site, the system identifies the physical location of the devise using devise IP address. Next the system automatically uploads the version that would match the common learning style in the country of the user.

Conclusion

Organizations build contents for online customer service based on the designer's cognitive style. These designers assume that people who access the online customer pages have one common cognitive style or learning style no matter where they are in the world. We argue that culture may determine the typical learning style of its people. In other words, a typical learning style in some cultures could be visual, in other cultures it could be aural, in others read/ write and in others Kinesthetic. Culture is a shared system of meaning (Schein, 1990). The definition, meaning and the interpretation of the world given by people in a culture are shared among them. This meaning becomes the norms in that particular culture. The meaning of something is the result of the interpretation given by the individual. We may argue for example that collectivist high-context cultures such as China and Arab countries would prefer learn by watching videos and pictures of people whereas in low-context and individualistic cultures such as the North American countries people would likely prefer the read and write learning style. These people usually seek objectives and detailed information that would help them understand the context in which they are dealing in before making any move.

We argue that the fit between the design of the online customer service content and the customer learning style would make the service more effective. In other words, when a user with a visual learning styles access an online customer service site that present support and help in such a way that does not match the user style, the later may quickly search for an alternative way to get the request support and he or she would likely switch to the phone.

We invite scholars to empirically test our model to explore its robustness.

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