

DOI: 10.5902/ 19834659 33439

EVALUATION CONTEXT ROLE ON GENERATING ONLINE PRODUCT RECOMMENDATIONS

O PAPEL DO CONTEXTO DE AVALIAÇÃO NA GERAÇÃO DE RECOMENDAÇÕES DE PRODUTOS NO AMBIENTE ONLINE

Submission: 01/07/2018

Accept: 02/02/2020

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at contributing to Construal Level Theory research, complementing Wien and Olsen (2012) work relating interpretation context with services' perceived quality, satisfaction and recommendation. By applying online questionnaires on 690 respondents and using structural equation modeling, authors have corroborated Wien and Olsen' model for e-commerce environment, regardless of product category. Further studies could amplify the analysis of online environments, including the development of a specific and proper scale.

Keywords: Construal Level Theory; Word of Mouth; Services Quality.

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RESUMO

O presente artigo visa a contribuir para a pesquisa a respeito dos níveis de interpretação (Construal Level Theory), complementando o trabalho de Wien e Olsen (2012) ao relacionar o contexto de interpretação com a qualidade percebida em serviços, a satisfação e a recomendação. Por meio da aplicação de pesquisa on-line com 690 respondentes e com o uso de modelagem de equações estruturais, o estudo permitiu corroborar o modelo proposto por Wien e Olsen também no ambiente on-line e relacionado com o comércio eletrônico, independente de categoria específica.

Palavras-chave: *Nível de interpretação; Comunicação boca-a-boca; Qualidade em serviços.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Wien and Olsen (2012a) published a study on how evaluation contexts influence the intention to recommend food products. The evaluation contexts are related to the Construal Level Theory (CLT) (Trope & Liberman, 2003). The theory states that depending on the one's psychological distance from the events or products they evaluate, that distance affects the evaluation (Trope & Liberman, 2003).

The object of Wien and Olsen's (2012) study was a specific product category and the evaluation covered respondents' intention to positively recommend that product based on their perceived quality and satisfaction in the traditional purchase and consumption context, an off line environment.

With the objective of build on knowledge beyond the above referred study, we identified the need to study the phenomenon in different contexts and with different manipulation forms. Based on that assumption and on Khare et al. (2011), who incentives and acknowledges the importance to study online recommendation, this paper evaluated an online context, considering short- and long-term purchases for different products. By choosing a diverse list of products prevents from achieving results constrained to one or few categories.

Thus, this article aims at evaluating how psychological distance affects transaction context (specific or accumulated), moderating the relationships between satisfaction and perceived quality, satisfaction and recommendation and perceived quality and recommendation, based on purchases through the internet.

By confirming Wien and Olsen's model (2012) in the online context, this article adds to the CLT theory by reassuring its effect on perceived quality and satisfaction, verified through intention to recommend.

Next, we will present the conceptual model and the research hypothesis, followed by the research method, analysis of results and discussion, as well as implications.

2. Conceptual Model and Hypothesis

Figure 1 illustrates our conceptual model and hypothesis to be tested, indicating that perceived quality and satisfaction impact directly on intention to recommend, for a purchase through the internet. However, this model differs from previous satisfaction and loyalty studies (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, & Bryant, 1996; Vieira, de Matos, & Slongo, 2009; Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2011). In those papers, quality has an indirect effect over behavioral intentions, mediated by satisfaction, whilst this paper assumes a direct relationship between perceived quality and satisfaction with recommendation. That assumption is described in a few studies that involve both quality and satisfaction as direct predictor of other constructs (Cronin & Fox, 2010; Wien & Olsen, 2012b).

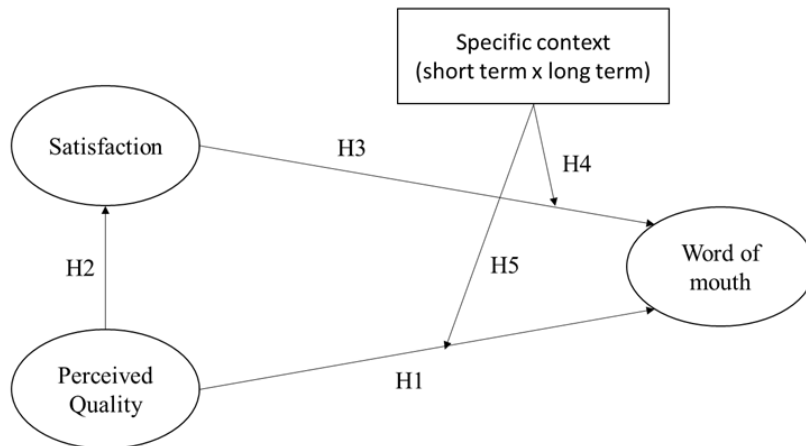


Figure 1 – Structural model and hypothesis
 Source: Adapted from Wien and Olsen (2012)

Throughout the article we will present the definitions of the model’s constructs and the corresponding literature to support the model’s hypothesis.

2.1. Recommendation

The recommendation concept was conceived as a consequence of interpersonal influence studies, as Whyte was already publishing on Fortune Magazine in 1954 that “practically everybody agrees that the American consumer is immensely susceptible to word of mouth” (Whyte, 1954, in Arndt, 1967).

Recommendation could be defined as the communication about a product or service without the material counterpart (Dichter, 1966) or as a search to reduce the implicit risk of purchasing through a social support (Arndt, 1967). Recommendation could be understood as the informal communication about characteristics or performance of a product (Matos & Rossi, 2008).

Hence, personal recommendation play a special role on consumer’s decision process. In a classic study by Menzel and Katz (1955), they have observed that the main influence so that doctors got to know a new medication came from the laboratory representatives and not specialized journals or respectable colleagues. In a different study, Cohen and Golden (1972) found that even when evaluation product only for flavor, judgement varied according to other people’s opinions.

Yet, the antecedents of the motivation to recommend could be diverse. Affective aspects could be contributing regardless of consumers satisfaction level (Westbrook, 1987), what was ultimately proven by Harrison-Walker (2001), who also proposed a model that takes into account the perceived quality towards the service.

2.2. Perceived Quality

Questioning about the perceived quality of products and services means to investigate how consumers react to those products and services attributes. Considering that idea, services quality studies have great support on Parasuraman, Zeithmal e Berry work, who developed a scale to evaluate services (1991; 1985, 1988). On Wien and Olsen’s study (2012), the authors

refer to Oliver studies (2010a), concluding that quality is more of a cognitive evaluation made by the consumer.

Thus, the authors of the original study proposed the first research hypothesis, adapted to this paper's objectives:

H1: Perceived quality is positively related to recommendation for online purchases.

2.3 Satisfaction

In consonance with the proposition to extend Wien and Olsen's work, we will approach consumer satisfaction through the perspective that it involves a consumer's affective process, based on a well-being, consumption experience derived sensation (Oliver, 2010a). It is also necessary to consider the matter of time elapsed for the experience to take place: one can measure satisfaction against a specific consumption experience or without a defined temporal component, as long as it is conceptualized as a post-consumption experience.

Based on Wien and Olsen's hypothesis (2012b), we suggest:

H2: Quality is positively related with consumer satisfaction for online purchases.

Several studies consider satisfaction as an important factor to predict consumers' repurchase behavioral intentions. Both academic researchers and marketing professionals evaluate consumers' satisfaction as an antecedent for loyalty (Bodet, 2008; Brunner, Stöcklin, & Opwis, 2008; Larán & Espinoza, 2004). According to Oliver (1999), satisfaction is a necessary step towards loyalty creation. That idea resonates with Bitner (1999), who also claims that satisfaction is an antecedent for loyalty, as expectation confirmation and perceived quality are means through which consumer's post-consumption reactions occur. As Laran and Espinoza (2004) state, satisfaction remains as its main prognostic. Hence, we expect the following relationship:

H3: Satisfaction is positively related with word-of-mouth communication for online purchases.

2.4. On-line x Off-line environments

We cannot oversee the importance on-line recommendation has gathered in the last years. Studies already point to the existence of a new format, the viral mobile marketing (Palka, Pousttchi, & Wiedemann, 2009). On-line recommendation studies analyzed recommendation website users' level of experience (Karakaya & Barnes, 2010), users who make electronic recommendations (eWOM) credibility influence (Fan, Miao, Fang, & Lin, 2013), including reviews by pairs as electronic advertising (Lee, Park, & Han, 2011), volume of eWOM and its impact on persuasion (Khare et al., 2011) and the effects of joining virtual communities (Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011).

However, that new environment brings out a re-evaluation of what Nelson postulated regarding the restless information digging for search products and minimum research effort for experience products (Nelson, 1970). With information made available on a global network, that search becomes less differentiated between those categories of products, once their attributes, both for search and experience products, are available just a click away (Huang, Lurie, & Mitra, 2009). In fact, Huang, Lurie e Mitra's work (2009) verified that, whilst the difference in the mechanisms for researching both search and experience product remains for the off-line environment, that difference vanishes in the on-line environment.

Nonetheless, satisfaction and perceived quality evaluation will be made towards a website, intention to recommend using a website will be impacted in the same fashion demonstrated by Wien and Olsen's original study (2012).

2.5 Psychological distance and context evaluation as moderators of consumer behavior

On Trope and Liberman (2003) proposed *Construal Level Theory* (CLT), it was for the first time established the guidelines regarding psychological distance. According the authors, based on the distance a specific event or object are evaluated, CLT would influence individual judgement. On one hand, if psychological distance were low, then the individual would base its judgment on more concrete and detailed characteristics to build the representation of what is being evaluated (Trope & Liberman, 2003). On the other hand, if the evaluated event or object is more highly distant psychologically speaking, the representation of that evaluation will be formed through more abstract attributes, but ones that form the essence of the evaluated object or event (Trope & Liberman, 2003).

One of the aspects affected by the theory is communication. Messages related to green-consumption, for instance, if segmented in a loss framing and in a low psychological distance or in a gain framing and high psychological distance, lead to stronger attitudes and higher purchase intentions (Chang, Zhang, & Xie, 2015). Worth of note, CLT authors have demonstrated that the effects of psychological distance affect not only intentions, but also individual behavior (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Even risk propensity could be affected. People linked with more abstract evaluation contexts tend to take risk more often (Lerner, Streicher, Sachs, Raue, & Frey, 2015).

Still according to CLT, there are different ways an object could be evaluated based on its psychological distance (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). The distance could be established based on the time elapsed between when the evaluation is made and when the event takes place; or the distance could be spatial, what is evaluated is physically closer or farther from who makes the evaluation. A third form of distance refers to social distance, determined by the similarity between the person evaluating and the one being evaluated. Finally, psychological distance could be analyzed from the point of view of the probability a specific event will (or will not) happen.

However, opposite to studying the future, psychological distance evaluation could also be made regarding the past. Kyung et al. (2010) demonstrated that events recalled based on more concrete characteristics seemed closer, while events related to more abstract mindsets sounded more distant. Psychological distance could also interfere, for instance, on sensitizing about omitted product information. People tend to be more sensitive to missing information when they are driven to lower abstraction levels (Pfeiffer et al., 2014).

Still when it comes to people's reactions, emotions that eventually emerge from negative experiences also affect the way people relate with the context they are evaluating. In a recent study Han, Duhachek and Agrawal (2014) showed guilt to induce people to react with a lower abstraction level, while shame would lead to higher construal levels. As far as emotions are concerned, people with lower distance levels tend to feel any given sentiment more intensely, leading them to relate more strongly with emotional ads, differently from higher distance levels people, who would rather pick cognitively appealed ads (Septianto & Pratiwi, 2014).

Hence, based again on the hypothesis suggested by Wien and Olsen (2012) and using also the psychological distance theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003):

H4- Perceived quality has a stronger effect on word-of-mouth communication for a short-term purchase context.

H5- Satisfaction has a stronger effect on word-of-mouth communication for a short-term purchase context.

3. METHOD

In order to test the proposed hypothesis and thus fulfill this paper's objectives, a survey was designed and executed with a data collection instrument that was sent and responded by a sample of 690 consumers from all Brazil. The link was sent and managed during 2014 first semester, by a market research company that owns a consumer panel composed by profiles from all over the country.

To take part in the specific evaluation context – low psychological distance (Trope & Liberman, 2003), participants were selected if they fulfill the condition of having made a purchase in the chosen website in the last 30 days, considering the date they were filling the questionnaire out. That selection was made based on the information the candidates would report in their panel subscription. Even so, the questionnaire included a question to verify whether respondents had made an online purchase in the last 30 days. Participants to the second groups were selected if they had made any online purchase in the period between one and six months before the date they were responding their research questionnaires. Similarly, despite the information was available in the panel, respondents were questioned about their last purchased, to check if it fits the necessary timeline.

Those timelines were selected with the objective of constraining the evaluation and its conformity with the pre-defined contexts. Research audience consisted on consumers with internet access. Hence, this research sample was non-probabilistic and chosen by authors' convenience (Hair Jr, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009).

3.1. Metrics

Perceived quality was measured using E-S-Qual scale, from Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Malhotra (2005), a multiple-item scale developed to "measure service quality delivered by websites in which customers can purchase online". That measurement differs from Wien and Olsen's choice, as theirs was a single-product study, a fish that should be cooked by research participants. Wien and Olsen evaluated perceived quality through a semantical difference scale about the main aspects of the tested product: taste, texture and appearance.

Customer satisfaction about the website was measured with Oliver's satisfaction Scale (2010b) and adapted on Quevedo, Freire e Lopes (2013) article, a 12-item scale. In order to understand whether consumers would recommend the website, a 10-item scale to measure WOM adapted from Goyette et.al (2010) was applied. All scales were 7-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree.

3.2. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through Confirmatory Factorial Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), using SPSS AMOS 20 software. CFA was conducted using the Anderson and Gerbing's-two-step method (1988). In the first step, the model checked for constructs' convergent validity, pertaining to how much the items of a latent variable explain from its total variance, expressed from the items from each variable's *lambda* values, which should be higher than 0.6. In addition, discriminant validity was also confirmed, in terms of whether the latent variables are independent among themselves, which is expressed by *phi* values lower than 0.6 (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Kline, 2005).

According to that methodology, structural models are considered appropriate when, beyond having *phi* and *lambda* adequate values, they also demonstrate adjusting indexes CFI, GFI and NFI higher than 0.9 and RMSEA lower than 0.08. In the second step, the structural model was analyzed, which covers the relationships among latent constructs.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 2 brings discriminant and convergent validity results for latent variables Quality, Satisfaction and Recommendation, for the consumers who had purchased in the recent past. As Figure 2 shows, all *Lambda* values were above 0.6 and significant, indicating convergent validity for the constructs. In addition, all adjustment indexes came out adequate (GFI= 0.902, CFI= 0.956, NFI= 0.933 e RMSEA= 0.071), attesting convergent validity for the three constructs. On what regards discriminant validity, all *Phi* values were below recommended by literature (< 0.6), what confirms discriminant validity for the proposed measurement model.

Similarly, Figure 2 also brings discriminant and convergent validity results for latent variables Quality, Satisfaction and Recommendation for the consumers who purchased online in the long term. Regarding convergent validity, all *Lambda* values were adequate (> 0.6) and significant, as well as adjustment indexes (GFI= 0.934, CFI= 0.970, NFI= 0.944 e RMSEA= 0.056).

	Short term Standardized estimative	Long term Standardized estimative
Perceived Quality		
Item 1	0.81	0.73
Item 2	0.78	0.68
Item 3	0.9	0.82
Item 4	0.87	0.79
Item 5	0.83	0.82
Satisfaction		
Item 1	0.75	0.79
Item 2	0.88	0.92
Item 3	0.78	0.78
Item 4	0.76	0.78
Item 5	0.74	0.75
WOM		
Item 1	0.87	0.77
Item 2	0.84	0.79
Item 3	0.86	0.8
Item 4	0.88	0.8
Item 5	0.82	0.85
GFI	0.902	0.934
CFI	0.956	0.97
NFI	0.933	0.944
RMSEA	0.071	0.056

Figure 2. Measurement model estimatives

Source: elaborated by the authors, based on several studies.

When it comes to discriminant validity, *Phi* values for the correlations between Quality and Satisfaction and Satisfaction and WOM were above expected (*Phi* = 0.67 and 0.74). Thus, we conducted a new test for discriminant validity, using the forced model comparison and chi-square test method. That method consists on fixing the correlation between a pair of constructs and re-estimate the measurement model (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002). Discriminant validity is

confirmed if the chi-squares difference test (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) for the original and forced models is significant and if adjustment indexes are below the original model's. Considering the data presented on Table 1, we can confirm the discriminant validity of our originally proposed model.

Table 1:

Forced models discriminant validity analysis

Forced matrix	χ^2	g.l.	RMSEA	CFI	NFI	GFI
Original model	181.84	87	0.056	0.97	0.944	0.934
Quality x Satisfaction	196.43	88	0.064	0.96	0.935	0.923
Satisfaction x WOM	307	88	0.085	0.93	0.905	0.904

Source: authors.

After testing for constructs validity, we conducted the structural model analysis. Results can be found on Table 2. Data indicate that all estimated coefficients were significant. Therefore, based on the results, we notice that for short-term consumers, perceived quality positively influences website satisfaction and consumer recommendation levels. On top of that, satisfaction positively influences WOM communication, but in a lower degree than perceived quality. Results shows that, as theoretically hypothesized, when consumers evaluate in a short-term context, they build a proximal mental construction, more concrete-detail-focused and linked with their last purchased experience than more generic and abstract aspects. That leads perceived quality from the last transaction to be more relevant for consumers' intention to recommend than cumulative satisfaction built throughout the relationship with a website.

As far as long-term consumers are concerned, who had purchased on the website anytime between one and six months before the research, satisfaction positively influenced recommendation and perceived quality positively consumers' satisfaction. Satisfaction, on the other hand, completely mediated the relationship between perceived quality and recommendation. Hence, we noticed that when consumers are more temporally distant from the evaluated object, their mental construction was more distal, not focused on specific details from a single transaction, but on the relationship and on the website as a whole. That led the direct relationship between perceived quality and intention to recommend being non-significant and the relationship between satisfaction and recommendation to be substantially stronger than for short-term consumers, thus confirming our hypothesis.

Table2:

Structural model standardized coefficients

Paths	Short Term		Long Term	
	Stand. Coefficient	P-value	Stand. Coefficient	P-value
Quality=> WOM	0.53	< 0.001	0.01	N.S.
Quality=> Satisfaction	0.28	< 0.001	0.67	< 0.01
Satisfaction=> WOM	0.11	< 0.05	0.76	< 0.01
Indexes				
Chi-square X^2	277.07		181.84	
Degrees of freedom (DF)	101		87	
X^2/DF	2.74		2.09	
GFI	0.902		0.934	
CFI	0.956		0.97	
NFI	0.933		0.944	
RMSEA	0.07		0.056	
WOMR ²	0.32		0.56	

Source: authors.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper had the objective to evaluate how perceived quality, satisfaction and recommendation relate to each other and the moderating effect of the evaluation context over that relationship. Based on quality, satisfaction and recommendation literatures, especially similar studies, we suggested a conceptual model representing five hypotheses. In order to meet the objective, we have conducted a quantitative-descriptive study using a survey with 690 e-commerce consumers. Data analysis was carried out through Confirmatory Factorial Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equations Modelling.

Data analysis has shown that for short-term consumers, perceived quality positively influences website satisfaction and consumers' recommendation. Satisfaction also positively influences recommendation, but less intensively than perceived quality. For long-term consumers, satisfaction positively influenced recommendation and perceived quality had the same effect on consumers' satisfaction. However, the relationship between perceived quality and recommendation was non-significant.

This work has academic and practical implications. For researchers, it contributes by empirically analyzing Wien and Olsen's model (2012) in a different cultural context. In addition, this paper builds on Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003) by considering the context as a moderator. Hence, it contributes by adding new empirical results that prove the phenomena, while using a different manipulation method than Wien and Olsen's (2012). The evaluated context was e-commerce, although specific and cumulative contexts matched what Wien and Olsen used in their study.

For the e-commerce retailers, this paper proves the importance to take into consideration that, depending on the context consumers evaluate their websites, they base their analysis on different factors, hence the same consumer may make a negative or positive evaluation depending on the situation consumers make their evaluation. That scenario illustrates the importance to nurture quality and long-lasting relationships that lead to enhancing consumers' cumulative satisfaction. It also represents how relevant it is to serve customers well on each transaction, thus reinforcing a positive attitude towards the brand.

Among this research's limitations, there is the data collection process, composing a non-probabilistic and convenient sample, what prevents generalizing the results to the population. In addition, the scales used in this research, despite being validated in national and international studies, were not specially developed for this study's specific context and objective, what might have influenced the results.

Further research should encompass also negative recommendation and other dependent variables, in order to test the moderator effect of the mental construction level also for those constructs. A separate suggestion is to develop specific scales for the e-commerce context, aiming at increasing measurement quality and thus, obtaining a stronger explanation and prediction power for the upcoming models. And, finally, building on Wright et al's work on the implications of thinking concretely about false or truthful statements (2012), academics could identify whether e-commerce communication is perceived as more concretely built, hence stimulating truth perception by consumers.

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Contribution	[Author 1]	[Author 2]	[Author 3]	[Author 4]
1. Definition of research problem	√	√	√	√
2. Development of hypotheses or research questions (empirical studies)	√		√	√
3. Development of theoretical propositions (theoretical work)	√	√	√	√
4. Theoretical foundation / Literature review	√	√		
5. Definition of methodological procedures		√	√	√
6. Data collection		√	√	√
7. Statistical analysis		√		√
8. Analysis and interpretation of data	√	√	√	√
9. Critical revision of the manuscript			√	√
10. Manuscript writing	√	√	√	√
11. Other (please specify)				