THE CUSTOMER'S PERSPECTIVE: SOCIOLOGICAL ACCOUNTS OF E-COMMERCE ENCOUNTERS

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ABSTRACT

Creating value and continuously generating a positive Total Customer Experience (TCE) for customers is important for E-Commerce environments in order to attract and retain customers. We embarked on a study that aimed to identify those characteristics of a customer's service encounter with an E-Commerce environment that would help in generating a satisfying TCE for the customers. Our intention was to investigate negative incidents or obstacles that mar a customer's TCE. To do this we employed a selection of complementary techniques such as naturalistic customer-observations, focus-group like workshops, and structured-interviews of customers. In this paper, we present accounts of situations in which the customers experienced obstacles while interacting with E-Tailing environments.
The aim of this paper is to emphasise how we have been able to draw conclusions about the phenomenon under study from the rich data obtained from a customer's experience with E-Commerce environments. We will demonstrate how these accounts are insightful for understanding the customer's perspective, and how they highlight the inter-play of several factors – personal, socio-cultural, organisational and usability that impact on the customer's TCE and influence his perception of value and service quality from an E-Commerce environment.
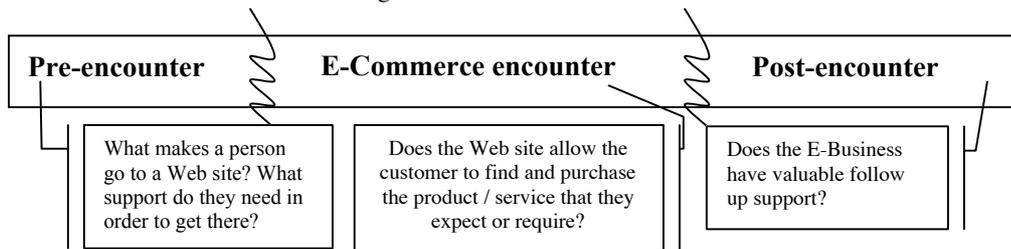
1. INTRODUCTION

In the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) literature (e.g. Nielsen et al. 2001), research into the success or failure of E-Commerce environments has primarily focused on the usability of the core Web site. Central to this has been how design criteria or heuristics such as ease of navigation and optimal response time can be managed to create usable customer-focused E-Commerce sites. However, it is evident from the relationship marketing literature (e.g. Christopher et al. 1991) and the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) literature (e.g. Dyche 2002) that a customer's interaction with an E-Commerce environment extends beyond the transaction on the Web site. In fact, an *E-Commerce* environment implies not only the front-end of the E-Commerce, which is the Web site, but also the back-office systems such as the security of credit card handling, delivery of products / services, pre- and post-sales support and contact with staff.

The three stages of a customer's interaction with an E-Commerce environment constitute a *service encounter* (Gabbott & Hogg 1998): a pre-encounter stage; an encounter with the E-Shopping site; and finally a post-encounter (or post-transaction) stage (see Figure 1). The *Total Customer Experience* (TCE) is the customer's holistic experience over all the three stages of this service encounter. The breadth of the service encounter highlights that it is not only the physical design of the Web site - the retail front-end of the E-Commerce environment and its usability, but the entire transaction involving the customer's interaction via different touch points (e.g. phone, fax, e-mail, on-line chat) and across the different departments of the organisation (e.g. credit card handling, customer services, delivery mechanisms) that influences customer satisfaction and perception of value. *Value* from a customer perspective may be defined in terms of satisfaction with the TCE, and perceived quality of the service received in the course of the service encounter.

Figure 1 The service encounter

Pre-encounter	E-Commerce encounter	Post-encounter
What makes a person go to a Web site? What support do they need in order to get there?	Does the Web site allow the customer to find and purchase the product / service that they expect or require?	Does the E-Business have valuable follow up support?

With increasing competition in the E-marketplace, it is important for the success of an E-Commerce environment that it not only attracts customers but also retains them. To retain customers it is necessary to ensure that the customer perceives value during his interaction with the E-Commerce environment (Weinstein & Johnson, 1999). A positive perception of value (when the customers' experiences meet or exceed the customers' expectations) will exhibit great influence in persuading a customer to return to the site. Therefore, generating a positive TCE and then to continuously provide one, is important for (B2C) E-Businesses in order to first acquire customers and then to retain them (Seybold, 2001).

In our cross-disciplinary research programme integrating CRM and HCI, the research goal has been to determine how service quality and hence CRM strategies can be incorporated into the design of E-Commerce operations so as to engender customer retention, trust, and loyalty. One of the outcomes of this research programme is a framework, which we have named WebQUAL. WebQUAL consists of *e-CRM (CRM for E-Economy)* or *customer-relationship enhancing heuristics* which can be applied to integrate customers' perceived dimensions of service quality in the design and evaluation of E-Commerce environments. In developing the WebQUAL framework, we embarked on a study that aimed to capture the customer's perspective of desired service quality by focusing on those situations in which the service quality was diminished. These negative incidents or *obstacles* were seen to mar a customer's TCE.

We define *obstacles* as those aspects of an E-Commerce environment which make it unpleasant, onerous, inefficient, or impossible for the customer to achieve a positive TCE. Occurrence of obstacles during a service encounter diminishes the customer's perception of value. Through an understanding of obstacles, our aim is to propose e-CRM heuristics for the design and evaluation of E-Commerce environments that will prevent such obstacles from occurring, and hence generate a positive TCE.

During the analysis of the data that arose from our study, a total of 194 obstacles were elicited. Each obstacle was explored as part of a context including: the stage of the service encounter, a consequence of the obstacle, and the customer's response to the situation which arose as a result of the obstacle. In addition, suggestions were made about requirements and design solutions that could have resolved the obstacle. We have termed the description of an occurrence of an obstacle and its context as a *sociological account*.

While analysing the sociological accounts, we found that there was a whole set of social, cultural and organisational obstacles in addition to the usability problems with the Web interface. Examples of such obstacles are customers' previous experiences with other sites, individual preferences and expectations, cues that diminish the trustworthiness of a site, the information content on the site and whether it meets customer's requirements. Furthermore, analysing the sociological accounts of different customers, and by applying a complimentary range of techniques, we were able to identify patterns, or themes, of obstacles which we developed into a *catalogue of obstacles*. The catalogue consists of a total of eighteen obstacle-categories, with each category comprising a number of sub-categories. Due to space limitations, we have not included details of the study, its methodology, and the catalogue of obstacles. We have reported these details in some of our recent papers (e.g. Dawson et al., 2003).

In this paper, we present sociological accounts of customers interacting with E-Tailing environments along with a brief commentary from us (the researchers of the study). Each account is representative of an obstacle category, and illustrative of the insight gained from each obstacle. Our aim is to emphasise how we have been able to draw conclusions about the phenomenon under study from the rich data obtained from a customer's experience with E-Commerce environments. Through discussing a selection of the sociological accounts that were extracted from the data we will demonstrate how these customer-centred accounts were insightful for understanding the inter-play of personal, socio-cultural, and usability factors that impact on customers' TCE and influence their perceptions of value and service quality from an E-Commerce environment.

2. DATA DRIVEN FINDINGS

During the first phase of study we observed 10 customers interacting with a number of E-Tailing sites, each carrying out self-motivated tasks. We had advertised around the University that we were interested in observing people actually engaged in online shopping experiences. Consequently, these customers voluntarily invited us to observe their on-line shopping experiences. Given that our aim was to capture the customer's perspective of desired service quality, only *in situ* observations of authentic interactions could encompass the customer's complete interaction environment (physical, social, and psychological). Therefore, the observations were *opportunistic*, conducted in the customer's own environments and of tasks that were customer-motivated and potentially committing the customer's own resources. These observations had the potential to expose factors not predicted – or possibly not attended to – by existing research which consider controlled task-based observation approaches (e.g. Preece et al., 2002).

During the first phase of the study, discussed in section2.1, observation sessions were carried out. The customer was encouraged to think aloud about the interaction, which was audio and video recorded in addition to extensive note taking. At the end of the shopping session, we interviewed the customer to clarify questions that had arisen during the observation. From this data, we were able to derive sociological accounts of a customer's experiences with the *E-Shopping stage* of the service encounter (see Figure 1). Our objective for this study was to identify those situations in which a customer's TCE was diminished.

In the second phase of the study, described in 2.2, we conducted a focus-group like workshop (Vaughn et al. 1996). During the workshop, the participants were encouraged to discuss their good and bad experiences with E-Commerce including their motivations for using E-Commerce. This workshop provided sociological accounts of customers' experiences across the service encounter. The data captured in this phase of study was both negative and positive incorporating the motivations for E-Shopping and those positive factors that persuade a customer to return to a Web site. This data did not feed into the catalogue of obstacles but led to our greater understanding of customers' expectations from their E-Commerce experiences. The aim of this phase of study was to elicit data about the *pre and the post encounter* stages of the service encounter.

During the final phase of our study, which is discussed in 2.3, we returned to the 10 customers that we had originally observed and conducted structured interviews with them to elicit their experiences during the

post-encounter stage of their service encounters with E-Tailing environments: did the products arrive on time? What was the state of the paper work and did they need to contact customer services? etc. This provided rich data and also helped to derive sociological accounts related to the *post-encounter* stage of the service encounter. Again, our objective here was to derive accounts of obstacles that marred the TCE.

2.1 Naturalistic customer-observations

We identified two main categories of obstacles:
- Obstacles emanating from the user interface, such as usability problems due to navigation, search and access mechanisms; this focused primarily on the usability of the core Web site (e.g. Vividence 2002);
- Obstacles with an emphasis on social and cultural factors, such as mismatches between shopping experiences in bricks and mortar shops or mail-order catalogues, with that of E-Shopping. These obstacles reflected the cultural, personal and social influences on the customer's interaction with an E-Business, which have been overlooked in the HCI as well as the CRM literature.

2.1.1 Problematic UI elements

The category that we termed *Problematic UI Elements* was the second most heavily populated obstacle category that emerged, with a total of 18 instances of obstacles in this category. This category of obstacles ranged from laborious interaction and data entry, to confusing semantics and ambiguous terminology. We observed a number of occasions in which the customer would leave a site as a consequence of such an obstacle and log onto a competitor Web site. One customer, who was already a customer of an E-Grocery store, was so frustrated by certain elements of the user interface and the time that it often took to load, she decided to try a competitor site. However, when asked to input her personal details and credit card information on the competitor site, she commented, *"I don't want to do this again!"*. She already had her personal and billing details set up with the first E-Grocery store; she felt it would be tedious to set this up all over again on a competitor site. This sociological account shows that customers that interact with a site over a long period of time can develop an inertia, which prevents them from moving to a competitor site even if they are dissatisfied with their experiences.

Another example of *problematic UI elements* involved a customer who wished to request a catalogue from a site. To request a catalogue she was asked to complete the on-line enquiry form and to click on the submit button. The customer was unable to find a submit button and after a few moments left the site feeling disappointed and frustrated. *"They say 'to make an enquiry, fill in this form and click on submit, the form will be sent to our showroom, if you leave your phone number we will be happy to discuss with you'...but the difficulty is there is no submit button here..."*

2.1.2 Informational obstacles

Information obstacles were the most commonly occurring obstacles, having 23 instances in total. Most commonly the information provided about products available on a site would be inaccurate, misleading, missing or repetitive. Interestingly, this often conflicted with customers' expectations about the Internet being an 'infinite' source of information. When there was limited information about a product, the customer would feel unwilling to buy a product. For example, one customer who wanted to buy a pair of shoes was unable to find out enough information to support her decision to buy or not. She was unable to find out if the shoe was waterproof or what width fitting the shoe was and without this information it seemed too much of a risk to order the shoe without trying it on first. This customer believed that the site could not support her in the decision to buy a pair of shoes. Consequently, she did not return to this site.

Information that was inaccurate would have a similar effect on the customer. For example, on clicking on a shoe size conversion chart, the customer exclaimed, *"this is very worrying actually, they've got 36* [European shoe size] *down as 3 or 3 and a 1/2* [UK shoe size]*, I'd have thought there would be quite a big difference there...oh dear me!"* This then left the customer feeling very suspicious of this site and was less willing to purchase anything. She had a negative perception of sites that could not ensure accuracy of information. She felt that if she did place an order, she could not trust that they would get the order correct. This customer left the site, unwilling to search on the site any further.

2.1.3 Misleading experiences based on existing references

Misleading existing references was a name given to an obstacle category in which a customer's expectations from an E-Commerce site did not match with his experiences with other Web sites, or with the use of catalogues, or with bricks and mortar stores. In total there were 13 instances of this category of obstacle. One customer who wanted to buy a present for a friend's child went to the Web site of a well-known brand in the bricks and mortar business. However, she was very disappointed at the limited range that was available on the Web site as compared to its bricks and mortar store and so left the Web site without making a purchase. Another customer who wanted to buy a pair of shoes, disappointedly exclaimed, *"is that it!"* on a site that offered a very inadequate range of products. She too promptly left the site. Customers expected the same experience (product range in this sociological account) across all the channels of a business – Web site, or mail-order catalogue, or bricks and mortar store.

The catalogue shopping experience was particularly influential to the Web experience. Often, a customer would come to a site having used a particular mail-order (paper) catalogue over some time. However, again, the range of products available on the Web site rarely matched that of the catalogue. Customers also seemed to prefer off-line catalogues for searching and comparing items across different pages, as this was so much more convenient than with a Web site that does not always provide the feature of easily comparing products.

Customers' expectations are also based on their interaction with other Web sites. For example, one customer who had found a present for a friend on the Early Learning Web site was quite disappointed when she realized that she was not able to write a message to the present, or choose the wrapping paper. These expectations had arisen from using Amazon's Web site on which these functions were available.

2.1.4 Cues that diminish trustworthiness

Although this category only captured 6 instances of obstacles, each obstacle resulted in the customer leaving the Web site altogether and therefore seemed critical to an E-Business. Even before a level of trust had been developed a customer would gauge a level of trustworthiness about a Web site based on some very basic factors. For example, one customer arriving at a site exclaimed, *"…there is no address, nothing, it makes me feel very uncomfortable especially because I know it's a UK Web site, but I think anyone can build up a site with '.co.uk', so I feel very worried… I have been to info, just to find out where they are, here there is one email address and one phone, again there is no address!"*

A similar sentiment was mirrored by another customer using a Web site to purchase a particularly expensive item. *"I was a bit nervous about … the amount of money really…and that I would get the product. There's still, I suppose, a bit of a trust thing. I picked a UK company, I bought locally, effectively…and I made sure I had contact details."* This sociological account illustrates that full contact details on a Web site, including a postal address of the organisation enable a basic level of trust to be established.

Another customer appeared to be quite hesitant to use a site to buy living aids for her mother who had recently undergone a surgical operation. She explained that there were no seals of approval on this site, no links to familiar health associations and she felt that this was, therefore, not a very professional site. She was unwilling to use this site for the types of sensitive products that she was after.

2.1.5 Limitations of customers' domain knowledge

Another critical category that emerged, with 7 instances of obstacles occurring, reflected the difficulties that customers experienced when their domain knowledge was limited. On one occasion this created some problems for a customer who was searching for specialist cycling shoes, which were to be a present for her husband. In this instance the customer had taken actions to support her search for "spinning cycling shoes". As this was an unfamiliar domain to her she had asked a friend for some advice before she started using the Internet. Her friend was a fitness instructor and so able to provide her with the names of some leading brands. After logging on to her chosen search engine she was able to input those key words provided by her friend in order to find relevant sites. Again, this account reflects the measures that customers take to support their experience with the E-Commerce.

This customer did find some information from a number of E-Commerce sites, but decided that she would prefer to go to a bricks and mortar store. She explained later that she had preferred the bricks and mortar experience, as she was able to go to a sales assistant, ask for cycling shoes, pick the shoes up, compare them, ask questions to the sales assistant and then bring her husband to the shop so that he could try the shoes on.

During her on-line experience, there had been no support to filter down her search using terminology that she was familiar with. Either you knew where to find what you were looking for, or you didn't.

2.2 The Workshop Discussions

In this phase of study, a workshop was held in which a group of six customers and two researchers discussed their E-Commerce experiences, both good and bad. One of the activities in the workshop was to examine the motivating factors described in Shim et al., 2002. Shim et al. developed a model of the benefits of using E-Commerce. These benefits were seen to be: lower prices; 24 hour accessibility; accessibility; no travel required and time saved. In the workshop the six customers disagreed with some of these benefits. They suggested that the price of products was not necessarily cheaper on the Web sites, and if the service provided was good, they would be prepared to pay more. The time saved was not a particular benefit, as they considered using E-Commerce to be very time-consuming. Finally, being able to access the Internet 24 hours a day was a nice idea, but realistically, there was rarely, if ever, the occasion to use E-Commerce sites after around 10 p.m. Furthermore, there appeared to be an awareness that the *"people at the other end"* also go home in the evenings and at weekends. One customer commented, *"you can place your order at 10 o clock on Friday, but it's unlikely to be processed until Monday morning…"*

On consideration of the data collected during both the observations and the workshop, we were able to distinguish between *three* different types of motivating factors. In addition to the benefits of using E-Commerce described by Shim et al, we identified the benefit of having heavy items delivered to your door. For example, one customer preferred to use E-Commerce as opposed to going to the high street store for heavy, bulky items. This customer was happy to view books from a book store then go home and order them over the Internet to avoid having to carry them home. Additionally, the immediacy of the Internet was seen as a benefit over bricks and mortar shopping.

The second type of motivating factors were those features that persuaded the customer to use a particular site. Examples of these emerged as: personal recommendations and testimonials, being a local or national site, an inviting feeling to explore the Web site, and so on. The final type of motivating factors was 'customer inertia'. These were the factors that encouraged a customer to return to a site. Examples of these were: customer registration with a site, a high standard of service, or feeling that the service was much personalised. We have already described one instance of this motivating factor in section 2.1.1. The motivating factors described here were not particularly obstacles that would mar the TCE, and so they remained separate from the obstacles catalogue.

2.3 Semi-structured interviews

The next phase of study involved returning to the original customers that we had previously observed. In this study we carried out semi-structured interviews that focused on the post-encounter phase of the service encounter with the E-Tailing environments that they had done business with. From the interview data, we were able to identify 62 obstacles and their obstacle categories that concerned the service provided by the business across touch points, other than the Web site and with different parts of an organisation.

2.3.1 Unsupportive customer services

Calling up the customer services is the next point of contact with an E-Business after the Web site. It is the customer services that a customer would contact to query a delayed delivery, confirm the order, and contest an over-payment and so on. Consequently, their role in customer-facing functions is very important. If the communication from the customer services is below satisfactory, the customer would be less inclined to conduct further business with the organisation. An example of this arose when a customer received only part of her order. This customer had ordered a special neck pillow for her mother and a duvet. The parcel that arrived only contained the pillow. Whilst the invoice identified the pillow and the cost of the pillow, there was no indication to the whereabouts of the duvet, or that this customer had paid for both the items.

At this point the customer decided to call customer services as she was worried that half of the order may have been misplaced or that she had not made a correct order in the first instance. She explained her concern to customer services and she later related to us that the service was very poor. *"I was not given any reason why the duvet would arrive separately, she didn't say that it wasn't in stock or anything… I have a little*

hesitation in contacting the customer services again because they did not provide me with accurate information and the way she was talking to me…as if '28 days is a condition, and you shouldn't be ringing up before 28 days'…taking it as if I've done a mistake ringing up before 28 days…I would much rather use [another company] *over the experience that I had!"* She was informed by the customer services during her phone call that the remaining part of the order would arrive within 28 days. However, the duvet arrived within 20 minutes of making the call. The duvet had already been dispatched and the customer services had given inaccurate details of the status of the order, thus further diminishing the confidence in the E-Business.

In this sociological account, the quality of the products, once they had arrived, was very good and worthy of comment. However, this did not outweigh the fact that customer services, the delivery and the paper work had not been of requisite quality. The TCE with this E-Business was less than satisfactory and so the customer would not wish to do business with them in future. An organisation should integrate its business functions to provide a seamless co-ordination in all customer-facing functions. Similarly, the customer should receive a consistent, high-quality, and one-to-one customer service across all the touch-points. He should feel that he is interacting with an organisation rather than one particular part of the organisation.

2.3.2 Problems with delivery

During our study, we found some strong reservations about delivery often discouraging people from using E-Commerce. 4 out of 10 customers had had negative experiences with the delivery of products and were wary about the inconvenience of missing a delivery and then having to drive to a depot or a post office during work times to pick up the delivery. The possibility of having to return the product to the company was also considered an inconvenience. For this reason over half of the customers were reluctant to buy products such as clothes, shoes, and bags on the Internet as they felt that they would prefer to touch and feel such products before they make the buying-decisions

One customer had a very poor experience with a courier company. This customer had ordered a bag of bird food, and happened to be out when the courier arrived. The courier had left the package outside the front door. *"Well you might as well put up a neon sign saying that no one is home, and we got burgled! And I'm quite sure that it was because we had this great big box sitting on the front step",* was the customer's account of the event. The customer contacted the E-Business after the burglary, who subsequently including an option in the order form to enable the customer to specify alternative delivery arrangements (for example, requesting for it to be left with a neighbour). Delivery was a major factor in creating a negative TCE, yet inversely could greatly improve the quality of a TCE. Free delivery, delivery in allocated times and on specified delivery dates and the speed of the delivery were considered benefits that could be offered by an E-Business.

2.3.3 Poor integration of the Web site with the back-office systems

Another cause of obstacles to the TCE was a consequence of poor integration of the front-end of the E-Commerce environment with its back-office systems such as the stock control, packaging or delivery systems. These were often causes of some considerable concern for the customer and the trustworthiness of an E-Business would diminish if such an obstacle occurred. One customer had ordered a number of Christmas presents for her children. These items were very delayed but what was most frustrating for this customer was that on placing her order she had checked the availability of the items. She was now told that they were out of stock and hence the delay. Whilst this company did keep the customer informed at all times about what was happening with her order, there seemed to be some breakdown between the stock control and the Web-based ordering systems.

In another sociological account, a customer had used the Web site of a high-street store to place an order for clothes. She had usually done this via the catalogue, but had decided to try the Internet. Having placed an order for a large number of items, the parcel that was delivered had a number of items missing. After waiting for a few days for the rest of the order, she contacted the customer services and was informed that she had made an order that was over her credit limit. The remaining items would be delivered as soon as her credit limit was repaid. This was disappointing for this customer who felt that she should have been made aware of this problem at some point through some form of communication. The Web site had allowed her to order above and beyond her credit limit. As a result, she did not feel inclined to use this Web site again.

3. DISCUSSION

In the sociological accounts that have been presented above, it is clear that there is a wide range of socio-cultural factors that can cause a negative TCE for the customer. To provide value to the customer it is evident that a usable and effective user interface is important. Additionally, cues that support the trustworthiness of a Web site, meeting the expectations of the customer, providing a high-quality consistent service across all touch points with an E-Business, etc, are clearly important factors. It has been illustrated that for a customer to return to a site, the quality of the service and the benefits for using a site must outweigh any obstacles that might mar the customer's perceived value and quality of the TCE. Consequently, in the current E-Marketplace, an E-Business should ensure that it provides value across all stages of the service encounter. This will help in changing 'browsing' customers into 'purchasing' customers, and 'one-purchase' customers into 'returning' customers. In the rich data set that we elicited there were numerous examples of negative TCEs and customers who were subsequently unwilling to return to E-Commerce sites. Furthermore, with the increasing competition in the E-Marketplace, there is little need to return to a site that doesn't provide value.

These sociological accounts clearly illustrate the limitations of the HCI literature that concentrates on the usability of the front-end Web site. Additionally, the CRM literature has yet to understand the changes that E-Commerce has made to consumer behaviour and consumer expectations. It is evident that both HCI and marketing disciplines have a part to play in supporting the development and evaluation of E-Commerce environments, yet this relationship is still in its infancy.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER WORK

By exploring the TCE and the breadth of the service encounter via a set of complementary techniques, we have built up a catalogue of obstacles (not included in this paper) that mar a customer's TCE and have highlighted the importance of providing value at all stages of a service encounter with an E-Commerce environment. By consolidating the requirement or design solution from each of the obstacle cards, we have now been able to convert each obstacle into a heuristic / sub-heuristic resulting in the WebQUAL framework. WebQUAL is an evaluation instrument consisting of Customer e-CRM heuristics and sub-heuristics for evaluating E-Tailing environments across the entire service encounter. WebQUAL emphasises those strategies which, when incorporated in the design and usability of an E-Commerce environment, will help a customer perceive value from his experience with that E-Commerce environment and this will help to promote customer loyalty and retention.

The next phase of our research builds on the evidence elicited during the workshop phase of our study. We intend to investigate in depth the pre-encounter phase of the service encounter. This will include exploring the motivating factors that persuade customers to use E-Commerce environments, to visit a particular site and then to stay on a site. Whilst this emphasises customer acquisition, this is critical to building customer retention as only customers who have come to a Web site hold the potential to become returning customers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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