

Research Paper

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Analysis of the effect of virtual store experience on customers' creativity by considering the mediating role of perceptual curiosity in Digikala online shopping stores

Mohamad Aidi¹ , AbdulReza Khorshidinia² , Aharareh Khatibi Noori³ ,
Pari Shojaeian⁴ , Parastoo Ghasemian⁵ 

1- Assistant Professor, Department of Management, Ilam University, Ilam, Iran

2- Master of Social Sciences Communication, North Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

3- Master of Business Administration, Industrial Management Organization, Tehran, Iran

4- Ph.D. student of Marketing, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

5- Bachelor of Business Administration, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Ilam University, Ilam, Iran

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Abstract

The present study aims to examine the effect of a virtual store atmosphere on customer creativity, with perceived epistemic curiosity serving as a mediator in Digikala online shopping stores. The research method is a descriptive survey in nature and applied in terms of purpose. In addition, it employs a correlational research methodology. The current study collected data through library research and field methods. All students at the University of Isfahan constituted the statistical population for the present study. The sampling method was convenience sampling, and based on Cochran's formula, the required sample size was calculated to be 384 individuals, of whom 336 students ultimately completed the questionnaire. A standard questionnaire was used to collect data, and its content validity and reliability were confirmed by experts using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite scale reliability, respectively. SPSS and Smart PLS software were used to analyze the research data. All of the research's hypotheses were confirmed. The significant effect of virtual store experience on consumers' creativity, the significant effect of virtual store experience on perceptual curiosity, the significant effect of perceptual curiosity on consumers' creativity, and the mediating hypothesis of the effect of virtual store experience on customers' creativity via perceived epistemic curiosity were proven.

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Corresponding Author: Mohamad Aidi

Email: m.aidi@ilam.ac.ir

Extended Abstract

Introduction

As the brick-and-mortar retail store evolves from its traditional form to a more advanced one, managerial and academic attention has shifted toward developing effective virtual stores. The proliferation of virtual stores has led to increased product and service similarity between them. As the instrumental feature of online shopping, such as convenience, comfort, and useful information, become significant predictors of online shopping attitudes and behavior, customers can shop from any Internet-connected location (Koo & Ju, 2010).

In the current market environment, it is widely acknowledged that customer creativity is a crucial and indispensable factor for both customers and business owners (Zhu & Mehta, 2017). Consequently, marketers and a growing number of companies encourage customers to express their creativity, involve them in designing and developing new products, and utilize their ideas in online marketing campaigns (Kim & Choo, 2023). These campaigns strongly emphasize customer innovation to generate creative ideas or outputs (Wu et al., 2015).

Customer creativity is defined as the consumer's overall capacity to generate novel consumption-related ideas. Theoretical and anecdotal discussions have also linked epistemic curiosity to customer creativity; curiosity involves pursuing new knowledge and experiences. Creativity also involves transforming existing knowledge, ideas or objects into something novel and interesting. This definition reveals the overlap between the two terms. Both pivot on the axis of freshness and novelty (Gross et al., 2019). Curiosity and creativity are two fundamental human traits: the desire to learn and explore; and create new and valuable things (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017). Some organizations have recognized curiosity as a fundamental value, a stimulant of creativity, and a genesis of competitive edge; researchers tend to focus on what has been theorized as the beneficial effects of curiosity, such as creativity, rather than curiosity itself. Despite the importance of curiosity and creativity separately and the promising connection between them, these two constructs have rarely been the research focus simultaneously (Gross et al., 2020).

In consumer behavior research, marketing researchers have found customer creativity an intriguing but unexplored topic. On the other hand, as the prevalence of virtual stores has grown, several studies have focused on enhancing knowledge of successful functional aspects and enhancing usability and value. However, previous research has examined the various aspects of online customer characteristics that may influence customers' perceptions of environmental cues in a somewhat inconsistent and insufficient manner. Therefore, the primary question of this study is whether the experience of the virtual store condition influences consumer creativity through the mediation of perceived epistemic curiosity in the Digikala online shopping stores.

Theoretical framework

Virtual stores provide the highest quality images and allow customers to see a wide range of choices and specifications. Implementing virtual reality in virtual stores provides customers with a more realistic shopping experience from the comfort of their own homes compared to a unique and extraordinary online shopping experience. Moreover, the user can have a store experience by browsing and examining items as if they were being physically held, just as in a physical store (Billewar et al., 2022). Retailers invest in creating an inviting store environment that entices customers to visit and offers a pleasant shopping experience. However, retailers' websites cannot accurately depict the store environment. Virtual reality is one way to offer a distinctive online store experience (Jin et al., 2021). A virtual store is a website offering multiple products or services in its storefront. Customers can purchase these services or goods at the store and pay for them online (Faezi & Nowrozi, 2013).

Recently, curiosity has been introduced as a variable that influences creativity. Studying curiosity allows for a more accurate examination of its functioning. Individuals interact with the topic at the center of their creative endeavors. Intriguingly, the correlation strength for perceptual and epistemic curiosity was comparable, indicating that curiosity with a greater intellectual orientation and the desire for new sensory experiences may be necessary for creativity because curiosity increases the motivation to engage in creative activities (Gross et al., 2020).

Methodology

This survey-based research employed an applied objective and a descriptive-correlative data collection strategy. Students at the University of Isfahan constituted the statistical population (384 participants), of whom 336 were recruited through convenient sampling. As a data collection instrument, a questionnaire containing 11 items was used, the first three of which were related to the virtual store experience component (Yang et al, 2020), four were related to the perceptual curiosity component (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), and four were related to consumer creativity adapted from prior studies (Lee & Choo, 2020).

Discussion and Results

The partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SMART-PLS software was used to investigate the research hypotheses. According to the findings of the first hypothesis, a virtual store's atmosphere influences customers' creativity. The results of the second hypothesis indicated that the virtual store environment influences perceptual curiosity. The results of the third hypothesis implied that perceptual curiosity influences customers' creativity. The results of the fourth hypothesis demonstrated that perceptual curiosity mediates the effect of the virtual store atmosphere on customer creativity.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the effect of the virtual store experience on customer creativity by examining the mediating role of perceived epistemic curiosity in the online shopping stores of Digikala. The first hypothesis posited that interacting with a virtual store can increase customer creativity. The results of this hypothesis are consistent with the findings of Wetzel et al. (1994) and Alahuhta et al. (2014). Digikala stores can provide options for easy and quick access to different sections, including customer recommendations, by employing a group of website design specialists. Virtual store experiences may alleviate cognitive load, stimulate the imagination, and increase mental capacity for conceptualization. Virtual environments provide more advanced communication media than conventional systems, enabling users to interpret visual, auditory, and tactile cues to access information. Since the level of sensory information influences the customer experience in a virtual environment, the condition of the virtual store experience could stimulate customer creativity.

Testing the second hypothesis also confirmed the effect of the virtual store experience on the customer's perceptual curiosity. The results of this hypothesis are consistent with those of Beck and Crié (2018) and Yang et al. (2020). Exposure to high levels of sensory information, such as advertisements, is essential in provoking customer curiosity by enhancing the inclination for further knowledge regarding an object. In addition, sensory stimuli that customer experiences in a new way tend to evoke perceptual curiosity. This study focuses on perceptual curiosity triggered by visual, auditory, or tactile stimulation and motivates individuals to focus on the new perceptual stimulus. Customers are generally perceptually curious when they encounter novel sensory stimuli. Testing the third

hypothesis of the study indicated that perceptual curiosity positively affects customer creativity. The results of this hypothesis are consistent with the findings of Pizzi et al. (2020). Curiosity is perceived as an important antecedent to individual creativity. An immersive virtual store experience can enhance consumer creativity through the curiosity mechanism. Customers may perceive higher curiosity in virtual settings since it provides a more lucid experience. Curiosity is an intrinsic motivation for the consumer and appears to be the most relevant variable for explaining consumers' exploratory behavior. Moreover, heightened curiosity prolongs the time allocated and attention to specific information. Furthermore, curious individuals ask questions, persevere through challenging tasks, and examine intriguing objects. The positive effect of the mediating role of perceptual curiosity in the relationship between the virtual store and customer creativity was also revealed by testing the fourth hypothesis of the study. We anticipate that the complex sensory stimuli generated by virtual reality will stimulate perceptual curiosity. Moreover, perceptual curiosity, defined as the desire to motivate inquiry behaviors to pursue new information, positively influences customer creativity. The relationship between the virtual store experience and customer creativity is therefore mediated by perceptual curiosity.