

THE ROLE OF THE EXTERNAL FACTORS IN ANTICIPATING AND EXPLAINING THE BEHAVIOR OF THE E-LEARNING PLATFORM'S USERS

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Abstract:

In a knowledge-based society the role of learning performance is always highlighted. The development of education and its adaptation to the real necessities of the labor market requires the integration of innovations to enable an effective teaching and learning process through a high correlation with the expectations and requirements of education key actors: teachers and students. Introducing e-learning platforms in the classroom allowed the observation of many behavioral issues often embodied in rejecting their use. Most of these issues can be explained and can be expected in the future through a detailed analysis of the influence of external factors on consumer behavior and by linking them with specific internal processes.

This paper aims to identify key external variables which influence the decision of using the e-learning environments by the educational actors within the Romanian education system, explaining and emphasizing their interdependence in shaping their perceptions of actual behavior.

Keywords: consumer behavior, external factors, e-learning, education, educational marketing

JEL Classification: M31, I25

Introduction:

The continuous developments of the educational environment under the influence of the new knowledge-based society requirements have increased considerably the pressure on education systems in the process of ensuring a better quality of educational provisions. Teachers are constantly seeking new ways to retain students' attention and ensure assimilation of information transferred in the classroom. The creation of new active teaching – learning methods, adapted to the course, by which the student is motivated and driven to knowledge, is still the main objective of educational approaches in the recent years. The introduction of IT technology and multimedia platforms in the classroom has outlined the main goal of implementing these ideas: the e-learning.

No matter the obvious advantages of e-learning environments for the Romanian educational area, reflected both in the classroom or outside as it increases interactivity and collaborative education development, the responsiveness of teachers and students, the leading users of these teaching – learning environments remains relatively low. The behavior adopted by them can be explained by *understanding and linking the external influence factors without neglecting the importance of internal variables*.

1. E-learning and educational system

The development of education within the knowledge based society requires the presence and promotion of three key elements: quality and professionalism in lifelong learning, creating and developing knowledge and its dissemination. At the base of these three elements is situated innovation, a crucial role having especially IT innovation (Weert, 2006).

E-learning is seen as a revolutionary system in continuous learning, the key developer of the future educational (Baker, op. cit. Aldhafeeri, 2006).

Derek Stockley defines e-learning as *"the delivery of instruction or training program through electronic means. E-learning involves the use of computer or electronic media to ensure the transfer of educational material"* (Stockley, 2003).

To respond effectively to the requirements of education, e-learning combines the features of typical Web environments with the most important features of real classes (Trăușanu - Matu, 2005). In the e-learning environments, both students and instructors have a higher level of control over their actions, and they are actively involved in learning processes. E-learning offers practical application of concepts presented in the theoretical part, facilitating student access to a variety of real examples and lessons appropriate to the content taught. The platforms allow the use of numerous technologies and methods of communication between the members of virtual communities: discussion lists and forums, synchronous chat, audio - video conferencing solutions, interactive tables, etc. Through all these methods but also by requiring frequent reviews (*feedback*), e-learning counteracts risk the loss of interest of the subject of training.

According to the study made by Porras - Hernandez, *students are parts of a whole* – the e-learning community; therefore their involvement in the evolution of the entire community is essential to its existence. The community recognized *the importance of individual learning* through this being achieved *a superior responsibility of the students* for the obtained results according to their efforts (Porras - Hernandez, 2000).

Using these technologies in the learning process requires the increasing number of the *interactivity* elements, *self-orientation and collaborative learning*. Interactivity is provided via multimedia and software application, interpretation and response to the student's feedback and through the communication and networking capacity of the teacher.

Perceived as innovative elements of the educational environment, e-learning platforms allow high interaction between student and teacher as well as between the members of the group of students.

2. The role of external factors in anticipating and explaining the behavior of e-learning platforms users

In the context of the holistic marketing, knowing the consumer behavior and his needs is critical. The efficiency of all economic activity is strictly related to correlation and adaptation to the needs of potential customers and the superior satisfaction of these needs. Adapting to the market requires in-depth knowledge of consumer needs and of the specific behavioral processes to predict the decisions taken by them.

Balaure, defines consumer behavior as *"all acts of decision made by an individual or a group, directly related to obtaining and using goods and services in order to meet*

the current and future needs, including decision-making processes that precede and determine these acts" (Balaure and others, 2005). Consumer behavior is influenced by several factors whose action can be direct or indirect observable.

"The education consumer has a certain behavior materialized in the totality of the acts and decisions regarding the recovery of the opportunities in order to obtain and use the educative goods and the services. Therefore there must be taken into consideration certain actions: the perception of the stimuli, the mental processing of the information received from outside, so that the consumers might become aware of the education needs, being informed about the existing education needs, their content, their use, diversity and accessibility" (Avram E., Neagoe C., Avram R. 2010) .

Lars Perner separates the determinants of consumer behavior into two broad categories, taking in account the influences exerted. In the category of external influences are employed cultural factors, demographic or marketing factors, giving *a great importance to the cultural influences* (Perner, 2000).

Catoiu and Teodorescu group the factors with a directly observable influence (situational factors, economic factors, demographic and marketing mix factors) and the factors with a deduced influence (such as endogenous factors - perception, motivation, personality, learning and attitude and exogenous factors: - family, group affiliation, the reference group, social class, culture and subculture) (Catoiu, Teodorescu, 2004).

In the case of the e-learning platforms the major consumers (basically users of these technologies) from the educational field are considered teachers and students. *Their perception on the new technologies introduced in the teaching- learning process is dependent on the numerous internal and external variables that determine the adoption of a behavior reflected in the acceptance or rejection of the e-learning environments.*

This paper aims to identify key external factors and the role they play in adopting a particular behavior.

From the category of external factors with a directly observable influence, the most important are considered to be the socio-cultural factors. According to Philip Kotler, *culture is the fundamental determinant of a person's desires and behavior* "(Kotler, Keller, 2008). Individual assimilates into a whole cultural context the values, perceptions, preferences and behaviors specific to a social group to which he belongs. Each culture includes several subcultures (cultural subsystems), each promoting a series of specific cultural norms and beliefs. Knowledge and understanding of specific subcultures and their differences is a key issue in the study of consumer behavior. The need to adapt products and services and others elements of marketing mix in specific subcultures has led to a new branch of marketing - multicultural marketing. *The values assimilated in the cultural area to which the individual belongs can decisively influence his perception of educational innovation and his behavior.* The conservatism extrapolated from the specific Romanian cultural environment becomes the main factor in influencing the manifestation of reluctance or even refusal of the e-learning solutions within the education system.

The issue of the influence of socio – cultural factors on the behavior is actually studied in detail by Lars Perner in his work entitled "Consumer Behavior". Perner highlights the specific cultural differences and oppositions: individualism vs. collectivism, masculine vs. feminine, ethnocentrism vs. cultural individualism, concrete vs. ambiguous (Perner, 2000). Knowing the specifics of each subculture by identifying the appropriate parameter for the antithesis above represents for Perner the generator

element of success in anticipating and explaining consumer behavior. The differences in language and especially the type of regionalisms elements are considered essential in the study of consumer behavior, as well as non - verbal communication which is very important in some cultures (so called "high-context cultures") or insignificant in other cultural spaces (low context cultures). Language differences are the main criterion for the delimitation of the two types of cultures, the impossibility of verbal communication emphasizing the role of nonverbal communication.

The group of social factors includes elements of external influence such as reference groups, family, social roles and statutes.

"A person's reference groups are consisting of all the groups engaged in direct (face to face) or indirect influence on the person's attitude or behavior" (Kotler, Keller, 2008). Direct influence groups are groups of belonging and can be primary (family, friends, neighbors etc. or secondary (professional groups, etc.).. The groups of indirect influence are groups of suction or disassociation. *"The reference groups expose the individuals to new behaviors and lifestyles, influence his attitudes and his self-concept, and are putting pressure on him to comply, which may influence his effective option in respect of products or brands."*(Kotler, Keller, 2008). *The knowledge on the reference groups is essential in identifying behavioral elements of the main users of e-learning platforms.* The influence of family is the most important element for shaping student behavior. The flexibility manifested within the family and its view on innovation in general but especially on the change in the educational environment is reflected faithfully in the behavior of the student. As regards the attitude of teachers the most important element of influence is considered the reference group, in particular professional groups.

Within a reference group the most important role is played by the *opinion leader*. He is acknowledged by the representatives of the group and his decisions are adopted and recognized by the entire group. Identifying the opinion leaders is an extremely important element in the studies of behavior in particular and in marketing in general.

The behavior of the e-learning platforms users is strongly influenced by demographic variables and especially by the *age and educational level*. Their influence is manifested mainly in the teachers, the acceptance of innovative solutions introduced in the educational environment being specific for the young teachers who are more flexible to the changes which occur in the current social environment. Also the level of training and especially the IT knowledge is a influence variable on the use of e-learning platforms in the classroom.

In the context of global economic change over the last three years, the influence of economic factors are of great importance in studying the behavior of the users of e-learning environments, the high levels of investment required considerably reducing the number of schools with specialized laboratories.

The category of the factors specific of the marketing mix includes the *"variables related to product policy, variables related to price policy, distribution policy variables and promotional policy variables* (Catoiu, Teodorescu, 2004). Product policy variables are related primarily to product quality and its correlation with consumer requirements. The research carried out in this regard aims to identify the level of customer satisfaction after product consumption. The implementation of e-learning platforms within educational environment imposed the compliance of the multimedia information provided by them with the curricula and the adaption of the communication interface to the specific

requirements of the teacher. The lack of prior research on teacher expectations and the main objectives of the education process were reflected in the use of these innovative solutions in the Romanian education system. The variables that refer to the price are often considered of primary importance in developing marketing strategies. The level of "price sensitivity" is one of the elements investigated in the market studies. Given the fact that most of the local education belongs to the public sector, we can say that the influence of these variables is relatively low. Distribution policy variables refer to items such as logistics and information on the typology and commercial flow profile. In the case of the promotion policy, a great importance is given to the research of consumer perceptions and reactions to different promotional messages.

In his work, "Consumer Behavior", Catoiu indicates the category of situational factors included in the group of the variables with a directly observable influence. Situational factors are "all those specific factors of observations (cases) well defined in time and space, factors that result from the knowledge of personal attributes (intra individual) and those that characterize the chosen stimulus) but have a demonstrable and systematic effect on the behavior"(Belk, op cit. Catoiu, Teodorescu, 2004). The importance of situational factors is even greater as e-learning platforms are included in the category of the innovations made in the educational field, which makes the various moments of contact and communication elements to influence perceptions and long-term behavior.

Conclusions:

Whatever the type of impact factors in any study of behavior must be taken into account the interdependence existing between them. The knowledge of external factors and the links between them permits the adoption of correct and timely purchase / use decisions. Based on information available, the individual can anticipate the action of various factors (in particular that of the situation factors) by adjusting their reactions and behavior to achieve the established goal.

The knowledge of external factors influence on the behavior of the main actors in the educational market - teachers and students, is a starting point in developing consistent and timely teaching strategies. The requirements of the knowledge based society involve the integration of the lifelong learning techniques such interactive e-learning platforms and their use in the classroom depends decisively on the perception that the future users have on these solutions. The analysis of the external factors allows the prediction and explanation of the behavior of the e-learning environments users. With regard to those presented in this article, we can say that by studying the external factors, without neglecting the internal processes one can obtain the necessary information about the behavior of the users of e-learning platforms in order to adapt them to the requirements of the educational market, in this way contributing decisively to the future development of this area and that of the entire society.

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