



Customer Satisfaction: Role of Web Experience Dimension in the Pre-Purchase Customer Decision-Making Stage

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to propose strategies for the marketers, they can use on websites/social media platform to help information overloaded customers in their pre-purchase decision-making information search phase to make a right purchase decision. Good pre-purchase decision taken by customers would create post-purchase customer satisfaction, which ultimately can enhance customer loyalty. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten interviewees to collect data by using thematic analysis technique. Data was collected from Saudi Arabia; generalizability to other countries might be restricted because of the cultural differences in online customer behaviors. Results derived from the interviews indicated that Alternatives with filtration option and information with timely interaction could increase customer satisfaction. The paper identifies the opportunities and suggestions to businesses/marketers about the use of information, interactivity, and Alternatives to improve the functionality and usability of the websites. Considering the rapid development of web sites and social media and their diffusion in marketing actions, this paper is a step towards the strategies businesses utilize on websites/social media platforms to help customers to take a safe purchase decision in their pre-purchase decision-making stage.

Key Words: Websites, Social media, Customer Satisfaction, pre-purchase decision-making

Cite this paper as

Farrukh, S., Raju, V., Sohail, M. F., & Ahmed, W. (2019). Customer Satisfaction: Role of Web Experience Dimension in the Pre-Purchase Customer Decision-Making Stage. International Journal of Business and Psychology, 1(1), 54–64.

INTRODUCTION

In this highly developed and complex competitive marketing environment, due to the advertising clutter, and too much information it is becoming difficult for the customers to make a safe purchase decision (Hemp, 2009). In this complex and perplex business world, marketers are using different techniques to attract customers toward their products ((Yuksel, Milne and Miller, 2016). However, unfortunately, the bombardment of marketing messages has made the vision of customers blurred and actually, these outlandish strategies push customers away instead of helping them to make any right purchase decision (Freeman, Spenner and Bird, 2012). For the businesses now "burning question" is, how to get nirvana of customers 'mind reading? How marketers can make sure their websites and online tactics are deeply tailored to fascinate and win different customers 'segments. Businesses need to figure out the behavior and priorities of consumers to keep pace with their needs and desires (kpmg.US., 2017).

History of the literature shows that many researchers and scholars have presented theories and models of customer satisfaction. Nevertheless, in spite of the overwhelming research on the concept of satisfaction (Anderson, 1973), some scholars classify it in some other contemporary aspect. Parker and Mathews, (2001) argue that when satisfaction is considered a process, its meaning focuses on "antecedents to satisfaction" instead of satisfaction, itself. Different researches designate the different relationship between variables to influence or enhance loyalty (Alshibly, Alzubi, and Qteishat, 2015). Researchers believed that foundation of all consumer behavior is Satisfaction and it is mostly related to experiences (Cronin Jr and Taylor, 1994; R. L. Oliver, 1997, Fuentes-Blasco, Moliner-Velázquez and Gil-Saura, 2014). On the digital platform, through buyer-seller interactions, customers gain unique experiences and develop trust (Monczka et al., 2015). Whereas, when satisfaction is considered as an outcome, it is considered as an experience, which is controlled by other variables. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine the relationships between Interactivity, Information, Alternatives and customer satisfaction on websites/social media platform to make any pre-purchase decision.

. Established relationships between the variable in the present study would be helpful to give suggestions to businesses and marketers, which they could use on websites and make their websites more productive, easy to use and helpful for the customers. By using these strategies, businesses can guide and help customers in their pre-purchase decision-making stage. By taking the right decision in this stage, customers can avoid post-purchase dissonance that might transform them into loyal customers (korhonen p., lauraéus-niinivaara t., saarinen t., 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information overload has made a purchase decision making a complexed phenomenon. Before a few decades, consumer decision making was a simple process for the customers as well as for marketers. Now digital natives are suffering from too much information and marketing messages. Marketers are unable to understand how to communicate to the masses, and on the other hand, customers look annoyed with the manipulative messages of marketers, which push them towards bad decision making instead of helping them or guiding them to a satisfying decision. Changes in the consumer behavior can also be attributed to technology.

Consumer decision-making process

Decision-making is the study of identifying and choosing alternatives based on the values and preferences of the decision maker (Al-Tarawneh, 2012). Many researchers agreed on the point that there are five main stages in the decision-making process and those are; first of all need recognition then search information, after that consumers evaluate alternatives then finally comes buying decision and after that post-purchase assessment (Cox et al., 2009; Kotler and Keller, 2006; Law, Buhalis and Cobanoglu, 2014). Tsiotsou and Wirtz, (2012) makes the process shorter and divide consumer decision making the process into three stages, and argues that to understand this customer decision making, this process can be divided into three phases mainly Purchase stage, pre-purchase and lastly post-purchase stage. In the present study, the focus is not the whole consumer decision-making process, but it is about only making a purchase decision, which is associated with information exploration. Researchers also

identified that in all the stages, the main important phase is the pre-purchase stage because this is the place, where roots of decision-making can be seen. If something wrong goes here, then the result is wastage of money, time and dissonance. (Rickwood and White, 2009).

Since the last decade, an invasion of technologies has produced numerous new ways in which customers and companies can interconnect. Because of the developments in the technology, now it is possible for the companies to communicate to the customers constantly and innovatively add value for the customers (Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2012). Consumers, who were once characterized as passive information recipients, are now considered as the active players becoming more sophisticated and confident and more demanding in the manner they control their environment and what they expect from the channels (Tiago et al., 2016). According to research, 81% of customers search before buying any product (Shankar et al., 2011). With that, consumers also have started frequently contacting other consumers on social media or online mediums and most importantly through customers' reviews, and for them, they are more satisfying than other mediums. In "digitizing the consumer decision journey" the author said, that consumer decision making has become so complicated. Customers try to get information on every point (Van Bommel, Edelman, and Ungerman, 2014). Now companies have more information about customers and customers have more information about products, and this move in technology has affected decision making also (Weill and Woerner, 2015). Customers TODAY, are too much aware of the products and services. They prefer to survey before going for a purchase decision (Thirumalai and Senthilkumar, 2017).

Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is defined as the manner or extent of how companies' products and services meet the expectations of customers (Taufik *et al.*, 2016). Online businesses play an important role in improving consumer satisfaction, and the internet has given them a new way to improve products and marketing (Lee and Kim, 2008).

Understanding satisfaction and its determinants are essential for a company to become successful (Jussila, Kärkkäinen and Leino, 2011). It is the combination of feelings and expectations before and after the use of the product or service. Online businesses play an essential role in improving consumer satisfaction, and it has given them a new way to promote products and also to do marketing (Lee and Kim, 2008).

Kotler also explained that successful companies go out of their way to make their consumers satisfied, as satisfied consumers not only make the repeated purchase and further help in marketing by providing word-of-mouth. Some companies further work to delight their customers by providing better than they promised (Kotler, 2011).

Interactivity/Communication

Interactivity is, "The mutual mediated interaction and considered an important influence in developing online consumer relationships and business experiences". So when the innovation factor of the internet is merged with interactivity, connectedness refers to "The feeling of being able to connect to the material world and to widen individual's experience" whereas information collection is "a web site's capability to provide and collect essential information for consumer transaction" (Ha and James, 1998; Merrilees, 2002).

Bruckman and Jensen, (2002) mentioned in their study that, if there is a good relationship between a person and web 2.0 then the possibility of decline would be lessened. The interactivity of websites offers plentiful scopes and qualities, including customization, service delivery processes, interactivity, awareness of responding to customer inquiries, and website security. Anna, (2016) explained the importance of interactivity in a way that Interactivity or communication is a factor, which brings the relations closer to each other. All the possible ways of interactivity, bring closeness between customers and companies plus it gives the opportunity to marketers to fully understand their customers and customers can feel more confident and satisfied. Interactivity also allows user approval and ensures that the consumer revisits the site.

Information

“Data based on facts is called information” (www.dictionary.com, 2017). In the context of online and from the customer point of view the purpose of any information medium is to get product information. On the online platform, there are two ways for the customers to gain knowledge, those are advertising material given on the websites, and the other one is impulsive reviews of customers (Villanueva, Yoo and Hanssens, 2008).

However, when the credibility of online information is being explored, source credibility becomes a more prominent concern. Sussman and Siegal (2003) classified two reasons why source identity plays a vital role in online communications. “First, information exchange and acquisition will be more efficient when the identity of the information source is disclosed. Second, source identity enhances source credibility, which then leads to information credibility and usefulness”. However, information can be a double-edged sword. Increasing information may either lead to the consumer looking for a better option and finding them, hence, having a satisfactory experience or lead to an overload of information making it difficult for the consumers to find the desired product (Thongpapanl and Ashraf, 2011). Ahluwalia and Kaikati, (2010) identified that attitude-vice as compare to non-loyal customers; loyal customers are usually less affected by negative information concerning brand and their attributes. Electronic Word of Mouth and blogs on social media also are considered a reliable source of information (Sallam and Wahid, 2012; Cheung *et al.*, 2009). Reviewers who share their information have a positive influence on others (Forman, Ghose and Wiesenfeld, 2008).

Customers' Reviews

“Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004).

Today's world is more global and connected because of technological advancement, which has affected individuals and organizations alike. The Internet has brought many opportunities for customers to discuss products and services with their friends or even with strangers. Especially customers' reviews are becoming more popular and credible. Customers believe more in EWOM than company's advertisements (Erkan and Evans, 2016).

When we make comparison, over-all marketing tools of communication, WOM is supposed to be more applicable as well as dependable. It can also reduce consumer resistance with some impact; it is so because it emerges from customer's experiences. Not only common consumers but also industrial buyers are becoming more inclined towards users' generated data (Aarikka-Stenroos and Sakari Makkonen, 2014). With the immensely increasing usage of the internet, EWOM is multiplying its potential advertising arenas. Now marketers also work on spreading positive word of mouth to create credibility because customers have started relying more on WOM than traditional ways of advertising (Hudson *et al.*, 2015).

Moreover, opinion leaders have great importance on websites; their reviews influence the decision making of consumers worldwide (Guo, Barnes and Jia, 2017). Negative reviews and positive reviews both effect on consumers' decision. Although it is not entirely in the hands of businesses they should make strategies and use influencers to handle these negative review (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Lange-Faria and Elliot, 2012; Mangold, W.G. and Faulds, 2009; O'Connor, Flanagan and Gilbert, 2010; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014). The former discussion makes the point obvious that Customers' reviews leave an impact on consumer decision making so where businesses should work on creating positive reviews, they also should make strategies to handle negative reviews too.

Alternatives

Alternative means a way other than the other available ways, which gives the means to get an anticipated destination or aim. Moreover, it is not necessary that other option should be a substitute for the first choice or give a solution exactly in the same way (Business and Dictionary.com, 2016).

In the recent era, the strongest drifts are the availability of some channels that customers have the opportunity to pick from when buying from different brands (Yurova *et al.*, 2017; Kannan, 2017). As computer familiarity and the approachability and availability of computers increase, many customers

have started using different channels so frequently (Jansen, 2017) and the quantity of online transactions mainly in the service trades starts to increase (Card, 2017). Customers now have more access to many suppliers they can select from and repeatedly spend their money on diverse businesses. Selections of channel hang on numerous factors including personal liking, customer requirements, and phase in the decision-making process and technology proficiency and other different approaches. Furthermore, consumers use channels for various stages of the decision process, like information hunt and product buying (Darley, Blankson and Luethge, 2010; Sigala, 2016) and this makes the study of the multichannel organizing process more difficult. Additionally, the degree and objective for which the online approach is used can differ from individual to individual. It is the rise of the internet, which has facilitated consumers to have more channels to use for exploration, acquisition and after-sales service (Strauss and Frost, 2016).

Many studies reported a relationship between consumers and levels of alternatives. Individuals, and consumers generally who use different platform to shop, report a higher level of satisfaction (Mols, 1998; Wallace, Giese and Johnson, 2004; Ansari *et al.*, 2013; Larivière *et al.*, 2011; Kumar and Venkatesan, 2005; Luhmann, 2000; Neslin and Shankar, 2009; (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

It was important to gain insight into the ways customers use to get information in their pre-purchase decision-making stages. To get a deep understanding of the existing trends of using websites in pre-purchase phase, qualitative data collection method was employed and interviews were conducted with the common customers by using thematic analysis technique. Thematic analysis is a category of the qualitative type of analysis that is employed to investigate classifications and themes related to the data (Ibrahim, 2012). For qualitative data, thematic analysis was applied to analyze the interviews conducted in Jeddah Saudi Arabia.

Participants

Interviews were conducted in Jeddah Saudi Arabia, with ten interviewees selected from different sectors, Jeddah International College, King Abdul Aziz University and PMDC group of Bin Laden companies. Four participants from Jeddah International College, four from King Abdul Aziz University and 2 PMDC group of Bin Laden Companies were requested to give responses regarding the pre-set theme, customer satisfaction.

Table 1-1 Role of the participants

Company	Total number of participants	Academic Department Professors		Administration department	
		Design department	Business department	Human Resource department	Finance department
Jeddah International College	4	1	2	1	0
King Abdul Aziz University	4	0	2	1	1
PMDC Bin Laden Group of companies	2	0	0	2	1
Total	10				

Conducting Interviews

Purpose of the interview was to check customers' pre-purchase trends towards websites and social media and to know about their intentions, which can transform them into loyal customers. The researcher conducted interviews in December 2018 by contacting different people residing in Jeddah, explained to them the objectives of the study, and requested them for their collaboration. Mostly to

bread familiarity closed-ended questions followed by open-ended questions were asked. Semi-structured questions by using customer satisfaction as a theme were asked from the interviewees.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interview responses were recorded and noted; further responses were summarized for interpretation. In this phase of the research, Researcher adopted face-to-face semi-structured interviews as this method was considered the appropriate choice for the present research to get opinions from the involvements and voices of the interviewees about what they think and do (Maxwell, 2012).

Consistent with previous researches, Researcher deployed three phases of data analysis: reducing data, displaying data and then the interpretation of data (Miles et al., 1994; O'Dwyer, 2004). By implementing the full structure of interview protocol, Researcher read, listened and revisited the interrogated scripts repeatedly. Finally, primary themes were identified and noted. Themes were summarized which were defined in the writings separately (Miles et al., 1994; O'Dwyer, 2004).

DISCUSSIONS

Interview results showed that the respondents perceived the actual objective of the research, honestly answered the questions about the issues raised during the interview. In the following section, some of the similar responses are summarized and given as evidence.

The first purpose of the research was to explain to the participants who were to assess the relationship between well-defined constructs, interactivity, useful and credible information, customers' reviews, Alternatives, and customer satisfaction within websites/social media context.

On most of the places, the strategy of the participant was, to first ask the simple question sometimes even closed-ended question to make them familiar with the background. Then in the next step, she asked an open-ended question to explore their opinions.

Question#1: How you think websites/social media can help you to take the right purchase decision?

Findings perceived by all ten interviewees showed that customers want to use websites and most of them found them very useful. However, at the same time because of some deceptive advertisements and forged practices they had doubts about the credibility of websites.

Question 2: How you think interaction with companies can help them to make a safe and right purchase decision or it is just information overload?

Initial responses emphasized the use of interaction only when customers need it. If they are not in the buying mode, they will perceive communication as an invasion of their privacy. However, when they intend to buy, they are in immediate need of help and contact. This is the stage, where businesses can jump in and win their confidence by giving them trustworthy assistance.

In the context of online and from the customer point of view the purpose of any information medium is to provide product information (Dictionary.com 2017). To explore the role of useful and credible information in online information search, the researcher asked participants to give their perceptions about useful and credible information on websites and social media then she asked,

Question-3: How useful and credible information can help take the right purchase decision, which can save them from post-purchase dissatisfaction?

Most of the interviewees associated useful and credible information with trust. About 80% of the responses were positive; they related useful and credible information with post-purchase satisfaction. Other 20% said that it depends on the functionality of the products/services.

The results emphasized that credible and useful information is an essential factor that helps customers in their pre-purchase decision-making stage — most of the interviewee's associated credible information with trust. Websites, which have a reputable image, can be helpful in the customers' purchase decision making. Customers' satisfaction can be increased if no hidden charges are taken from the customers.

“Reliability is an ability to provide standard expectations all the time. It is also the way companies handle the problems brought into the customer service that includes giving accurate services directly, timely and by keeping the record error-free” (Taufik, M. et al. 2016). The researcher asked the question,

Question-5: Do you think websites, which always share true customers’ reviews, are best to evaluate purchase decision? Followed by
How do customers’ reviews help evaluate a company is given information and for making a safe and right purchase decision?

Almost 80% of the participants supported customers’ reviews for evaluating purchase decision. Other participants 20% think customers ‘reviews always are not correct.

Results highlighted the importance of Customers' reviews. Most of the participants found customers' reviews helpful in the pre-purchase decision-making stage. Few of the respondents did not find reviews trustworthy.

Question- 6: Do you think it is always good to evaluate more alternatives before making any purchase decision or they create confusion for you?

Participants gave different opinions; 60 % of participants viewed that Alternatives always make them confused. 30% of participants said that they like to invest time in evaluating alternatives. 10% said it depends on the involvement with the products/services they need to buy.

Results showed mixed responses about the importance of Alternatives in the pre-purchase stage of decision-making. Most of the Interviewee s found alternatives just confusion in decision-making. However, according to forty percent reviews, it is difficult to take a satisfied decision without choices. Most of them admitted that the importance of alternatives depends on the monetary investment and involvement with the products/services. However, Alternatives given with filtration option can be the best solution to information-overloaded customers.

The next question the researcher asked was about the ease of use of websites.

To rank, the importance of all web experience dimensions the researcher asked interviewees,

Question-8: Which factors do you think are more critical in creating satisfaction and loyalty regarding purchase decision and products; Interactivity, Credible and Useful information, Reliability, Customers’ reviews, Alternatives or Perceived ease?

Depending on the respondents’ opinions, Credible and Useful information was the most important factor, then Reliability, then interactivity, after that customer’ reviews then perceived ease and Alternatives.

Results showed that Participants collectively viewed credible and useful information most important factor among all web experience dimensions and Alternatives was considered the least option.

FINDINGS

The primary aim of this research phase was to observe interviewees’ voices and perceptions about the factors, which can lead to customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in the pre-purchase decision-making stage.

Customer satisfaction in pre-purchase decision making was the set theme to check consumers' pre-purchase buying behavior. Questions related to their web experience were asked from interviewees to know about their purchase-related views which could help them to make a safe purchase decision.

The table below indicates the importance of web experience dimensions in ranking order.

Table 1-2 Ranking of Web Experience Customer Satisfaction Dimensions

Web Experience Customer Dimensions	Ranking
Information	1 st place
Interactivity	2 nd place
Alternatives	3 rd place
Customer’ reviews	4 th place

The first perception was interactivity which was defined as “Communication between

seller and buyer, and between consumer and consumer to get information about product/service” and its impact on customer satisfaction.”

Web 2.0 includes a vast variety of e-applications, which in turn help consumers to interact with one another easily. Their influence plays a vital role especially in decision-making (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Results were consistent with the results of quantitative data but not with the previous researches; it showed that 70% percent interviewees considered marketing messages as an exasperating intrusion (Paul Hemp, 2009). However, it is also crucial that they appreciated interaction when they are in buying mode. Constantly asking do you need this product is not relationship marketing (Andrick, 2018). A decision-making mode, when they have the intention to buy, and they need guidance. Almost 90% of participants said they want to interact with companies to be informed to form a purchase decision. Businesses should understand what and how customers buy and should give individual attention to customers (kpmg. US. 2017).

The second perception was about Information. All the interviewees were of the view that credible and useful information is essential in the pre-purchase decision-making stage. Almost 80% of participants said that with the help of useful and credible information they could avoid post-purchase dissonance. According to the opinions of Interviewees, credible information is associated with trust and secondly when no hidden charges are taken from the customers. However, the important thing, which should be considered on each touch point, is to give a relevant customized message. Only this strategy can strengthen the relationship and can provide value. Otherwise, customers can leave the company forever (Andrick, 2018).

The results highlight the importance of third perception Customers’ reviews. Almost 80% of participants found customers' reviews helpful in pre-purchase decision-making stage, rest 20% did not found trustworthy. Majority of the interviewees believed that customers’ reviews could help them to make the safe and right decision, which can bring post-purchase satisfaction and sometimes loyalty. A customer may read a blogger and purchase bases of those reviews (Hsu, Chuan-Chuan Lin, and Chiang, 2013).

Results showed mixed responses about the importance of Alternatives in the pre-purchase stage of decision-making. Sixty percent of participants found alternatives just slip up in decision-making. However, 40% found that it is difficult to take a satisfied decision without choices. Importance of alternatives depends on the monetary investment and involvement with the products/services. As computer familiarity and the approachability and availability of computers increase, many customers have started using different channels so frequently (Jansen, 2017) and the quantity of online transactions mainly in the service trades starts to increase (Card, 2017). Information overloaded customers want simplicity regarding decision-making. They want choices when there are more risk or more monetary benefits.

Depending on the respondents’ opinions, Credible and useful information, interactivity, customer’ reviews, and Alternatives respectively had essential positions in the decision-making process and post-purchase satisfaction.

Based on the interviewees and discussion mentioned above, indicators for the variables of the study were identified. Indicators of customer satisfaction provide a critical tool, which can be used on websites to make them more productive and useful. Indicators of customer satisfaction are given below in the table. Marketers, to gain customer satisfaction can tailor strategies and policies. Customer satisfaction has become an issue in today's information-overloaded business world.

Table 1-3: Indicators of Customer in the pre-purchase decision-making stage

Indicators of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in the pre-purchase decision-making stage	% of interviewees
Interactivity and Customer Satisfaction	
Marketing messages as an intrusion	70%
Helpful	30%
Indicator: Interaction is essential when customers are in buying mode	
Credible and useful information and Customer Satisfaction	
Helpful	80%
Not trustworthy	20%
Indicator: Trustworthy information is helpful, but the customized message can work better.	
Customers' reviews, Customer satisfaction	
Helpful	80%
Not trustworthy	20%
Indicator: Customers' reviews can help to evaluate the company's given information and helpful in pre-purchase decision making.	
Alternative and Customer Satisfaction, Customer loyalty	
Helpful	40%
Want uncomplicatedness	60%
Indicator: Can be good with filtration option	

Results of the interview exposed different perception of the interviewees about the variables and their relationship with customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Interactivity was perceived as an irritating and intrusive factor. However, they appreciated the information if they were in buying mode, even if it is interactive or in the form of advertising material. According to the majority of interviewees, Alternatives were found confusing but in some cases helpful also, especially when product involvement was high. Customers' reviews were perceived as a reliable source of getting information but not always. Participants were more interested in the solution of the problems. However, if a solution is given in an easy way that could be the icing to the cake.

It is concluded that useful information and Customers' reviews were perceived as significant and Alternatives, interactivity was considered less significant indicators to customer satisfaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MARKETERS/BUSINESSES

Tactical strategies on the platform of Websites/social media can provide a possible solution to information overload customers to make a safe purchase decision. Businesses can focus on factors like Useful information and Customers' reviews, which are possible reasons to create Customer Satisfaction. Interactivity and Alternatives showed a less significant relationship with customer satisfaction. However, the strategic use of these variables can make them useable and beneficial.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are a few limitations to the study. First, Research focuses more on consumers than businesses. Second, selected variables being discussed as web customer experience dimensions. Third, Sample was collected from the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Other data collection methods could be employed to justify the result of this study.

CONCLUSION

Relationship of all variables in the study identified the strategies, which could be used on websites to help customers in their pre-purchase decision-making stage to make a safe purchase decision. Customized information should be given at every touch point to make decision making easier for the customers. Interaction with customers can be started at the point when customers themselves show interest in the products and services and are willing to receive more information and interaction. EWOM and customers' reviews with the different planned and tactical strategies can be exploited to enhance customer confidence. Negative EWOM should be handled carefully. Satisfied customers are the assets, can be encouraged to be part of EWOM strategies of businesses. Alternatives should be given with filtration option in an easily accessible way to customers. Tactical strategies on the platform of websites can be used to help customers to make a safe purchase decision to avoid any type of post purchase dissonance.

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