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To fit or not to fit

The importance of consistency on the Internet

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Abstract

As the web emerged, almost every traditional offline brand created its own website. Two strategies were mainly pursued by brick-and-mortar companies: some translated their brand with the corresponding name, image and values to the website and others created a new brand name to exist on the net. As the expression of a brand on the Internet is not really limited, it is not evident that the image perceived by the website visitors is consistent with the brand image they have, generated by previous experiences with the brand. The aim of this research is to explore how the perception of consistency between brand image and website image affects brand attitude. Results show a moderating effect of perceived consistency on the relation between website and brand attitude.

Keywords

Consistency - Brand attitude - Website attitude

Introduction

As the web emerged, almost every traditional offline brand created its own website. Two strategies were mainly pursued: those who translated their brand with the corresponding name, image and values to the website and those who created a new brand name to exist on the net. The dominant approach was the translation of the existing brand to the Internet, because, among other things, "consumers prefer to see familiar brands online" (Business Europe, 2000, p.4).

As Stuart and Jones (2004, p.84) report, "the translation of corporate brand values from marketplace to marketspace is often strategically complex, leading to inconsistencies in the communication of the core brand values between the two". This issue is the object of this research, which is the perception of consistency between brand image and website image by the visitor and its effects on brand attitude. This question is of high importance as Dynamic Markets reported in November 2005: 97% of the interviewed companies underlined the importance of a consistent and well-managed website, leading to business improvement or benefit (tridion.com, 2005). This highlights the significance for brand managers to ensure the consistency between what is communicated via the website with the core brand values of the brand and other communications made by the brand (Stuart and Jones, 2004). In fact, even if an increasing number of researchers consider websites as a form of interactive advertising (Karson and Korgaonkar, 2001; Macias, 2003), a website is much more than a simple advertisement. Composed of several pages, it offers detailed information about the products and the brand, associated to other functions such as personalization and feed-back. The wide range of graphic opportunities makes the expression of a brand on the Internet as not really limited. In

addition to these intrinsic characteristics, the Internet offers the opportunity for consumers to interact with the website, the company or the brand. It holds the potential to be "a desired, engaging and positive form of communication instead of intrusive, annoying, or unwanted" (Macias, 2003). For all these reasons, it is not evident that the image perceived by the website visitors is consistent with the brand image they have, generated by previous experiences with the brand. In fact, a brand conveys a certain image beside the website, through other communications or product usage. Therefore, it is important for a company, to raise the question of consistency between brand image in the traditional and the virtual world.

The challenge for marketers in building a strong brand is ensuring that customers have the right type of experiences with products and services and their accompanying marketing programs so that the desired thoughts, feelings, images, beliefs, perceptions, opinions become linked to the brand (Keller, 2001).

The aim of this research is to explore how the perception of consistency between brand image and website image affects brand attitude. In other words, if these two entities are judged as being not logic and coherent, does the existence of the website has an impact on the evaluation the consumer makes of the brand? We consider only brick and mortar brands, which are brands possessed by companies that have a physical presence and offer face-to-face consumer experiences, in opposition to internet-only brands or businesses.

We first develop the concepts of consistency and brand attitude, by relating the use of congruency theory in literature concerning brand extension, advertising and sponsorship research. Second, the literature on attitude toward the website is resumed. We finally present our research model, results and managerial implications.

What is consistency and how does it affect brand attitude?

The consistency or congruence among brand associations or brand attitude is an important topic because it "determines the cohesiveness of the brand image - that is the extent to which the brand image is characterized by associations or subsets of associations that share meaning" (Keller, 1993, p.7-8).

At the origin of congruency theory are Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955, p.43), who stipulated that "changes in evaluation are always in the direction of increased congruity with the existing frame of reference". Subsequent to these authors, several researchers applied congruency theory to a wide variety of research domains, like advertising or consumer psychology (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; Solomon, Ashmore and Longo 1992; Graeff, 1996). Some analyzed the relationship between the beliefs an individual has about an object and his overall evaluation of this object. The theory of cognitive consistency suggested that "consistency among an individual's beliefs about an object is desirable and associated with positive affect (Heider 1946, Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955, cited by Häuble and Elro, 1999, p.201-2)". Attitude theory confirmed these findings, demonstrating that "a lack of consistency can lead to ambivalence, resulting in less favorable and stable attitudes" (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, p.124).

The brand extension literature uses the term similarity or fit to define the outstanding attributes which are shared by the extension product class and the brand (Keller and Aaker, 1992). Park, Milberg and Lawson (1991) propose that the degree of perceived fit between the extension product and the brand name determines the evaluation of brand

extensions. Other researchers confirmed an attitude transfer between the core brand and the brand extension (Boush et al., 1987; Boush and Loken, 1991), facilitated by shared attributes or consistency between product categories (Aaker and Keller, 1990; Sunde and Brodie, 1993; Van Riel, Lemmink and Ouwersloot, 2000). The rationale behind is that the consumer has to consider the extension as logic and consistent with the mother brand (Tauber, 1981) in order to generate positive associations and beliefs to the brand. On the contrary, inconsistencies can provoke a negative effect on brand image.

Other researchers analyzed the congruency effect relative to country of production and brand name on consumers' product quality judgment. In other words, the fact that a brand is manufactured in its home country influences positively product quality judgments (Häubl and Elrod, 1999).

Several studies in the field of advertising analyzed the concept of consistency or congruency in the context of celebrity endorsement, by examining the matching between the characteristics of celebrities or spokespersons with the characteristics of the products they endorse. The congruency between the endorser and the brand or product leads to increased advertising effectiveness (Kahle and Homer, 1985), higher believability (Kamins, 1990; Kamins and Gupta, 1994) and knowledge (Kamins, 1990; Lynch and Schuler, 1994) of the spokesperson, a more positive attitude toward the brand or product (Misra and Beatty, 1990; Kamins and Gupta, 1994) and toward the advertisement (Kamins, 1990). Solomon, Ashmore and Longo (1992) investigated the match-up hypothesis between beauty types and product images in advertising, showing higher evaluations of the advertised brand.

The same effect has been explored and demonstrated in several sponsorship studies, qualified as image transfer between a sporting event's image and the sponsoring brand. The image transfer is facilitated by the fact that the event and the brand are similar either on a functional basis (when the products of the sponsored brand are used during the event) or on an image base (when the brand image is related to the image of the event) (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999).

Other researchers examined the congruence or match-up between consumer characteristics and product features. Graeff (1996) for example investigated the influence of different levels of self-monitoring on the effect of image congruence on consumers' brand evaluations. Publicly consumed brands are affected more strongly by image congruence for increased self-monitoring and by the congruence between brand image and ideal self-image. Some researchers also examined the matching process between self-image and store image (Stern et al., 1977), showing that consumers prefer shopping at stores with similar images to their own self-image. In the same context we can find studies related to the congruency between in-store music and the brand. Beverland et al. (2006) showed that misfit could lead to a decline in the consumer-brand relationship. On the contrary, the outcomes of fit are brand reinforcement, delight or attraction.

In the Internet context, little research handles with the concept of consistency or fit. Rodgers (2003/4) applied the image-transfer theory in a sponsorship context to the Internet and analyzed the sponsor relevance and the context. In fact, "consumers who think poorly of a website or believe its content lacks credibility will use these evaluations when forming attitudes toward companies that sponsor the website. [In

other words], the evaluations formed about the website will 'rub off' in evaluations made about the sponsor" (Rodgers, 2003/4, p.69). Concerning advertising research applied on the Internet, Moore et al. (2005) showed that consumers develop more positive attitudes toward an advertisement when it is congruent with the context of the website where it is enclosed.

Considering the research above, we can state that being consistent with the brand is important in many fields, leading, among other effects, to more positive brand attitudes. Therefore, consistency is imperative while designing a website because, as demonstrated in social psychology, "people prefer consistency and avoid inconsistency regarding cognitions, actions, people, and events in their lives" (Newman et al., 2004, p.275). In addition, using consistently the same logo, colors and attributes helps the consumer to remember the brand. Moreover, as Levine (1998) reports, the consumer's online experience must be consistent with its expectations. Otherwise, by reflecting a diffuse brand image, the meaning of the brand can be confusing for the consumer (Keller, 1993). Consequently, a brand manager has to define what values the company or the brand want to communicate and how they can involve the consumer in the creation of added value. Furthermore, they have to consider how the consistency of the message can be maintained (McEnally and de Chernatony, 1999) and expressed through the website.

Attitude toward the website

One of the main research streams concerning the Internet was certainly relative to advertising effectiveness. Largely based on traditional advertising research, the main

findings were transposed and investigated on the Internet. For example, several authors measured consumer's attitude toward an advertisement, defined as "predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion" (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986, p.130-1). These authors, among others, demonstrated that attitude toward the ad is an indicator of advertising effectiveness and has a positive effect on attitude toward the brand and purchase intentions (Shimp, 1981; Batra and Ray, 1986; MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986; Brown and Stayman, 1992).

As we stated earlier, an increasing number of researchers agree in considering websites as a form of interactive advertising (Karson and Korgaonkar, 2001; Macias, 2003). Therefore, based mainly on traditional advertising research, Chen and Wells (1999) and Chen, Clifford and Wells (2002) adapted the definition of attitude toward the ad (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986) to a website, defined as "a web surfers' predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to web content in natural exposure situations" (Chen and Wells, 1999, p.28). This variable may be defined as an indicator of website value. By establishing a parallel between advertising research and the Internet, Chen and Wells (1999), but also Bruner and Kumar (2000), Bruner, Kumar and Stevenson (2000) and Chen, Clifford and Wells (2002) supposed that the relationship between attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand (Shimp, 1981; Batra and Ray, 1986; Brown and Stayman, 1992) may be transposed to the Internet. Following these authors, attitude toward the site plays an important role in hierarchy-of-effects: the more attitudes toward the website are positive, the more attitudes toward the brand are positive.

Several authors constructed website attitude scales and tested its effect on brand attitude or purchase intention. Others consider it as an extension of the sponsoring organization or as a brand carrier (Palmer and Griffith, 1998; Chen and Wells, 1999). Therefore, and following Bruner et al. (2000), Jee and Lee (2002), Raney et al. (2003) and Richard and Chandra (2005), we consider that attitude toward the website leads to similar consequences and influences attitude toward the brand. An attitude toward the website measurement derived from Chen and Wells (1999) is used in this research, because it constitutes a good indicator of general attitude toward the website and because several researches were based on this scale (e.g., Chen, Clifford and Wells, 2002; Wu, 1999), permitting its validation independently from its original authors.

By using this measurement, we are going to explore its effect on brand attitude after the website visit, moderated by the perceived consistency between the website and the brand image. We now describe the research methodology used in the data collection that constitutes this research.

Research Methodology

In this research, we concentrate on the consistency between perceived brand image and website image. More precisely, we investigate the moderating effect of consistency on the relation between attitude toward the website and attitude toward the brand. We expect higher levels of consistency to increase attitude toward the brand after the website visit.

Our main proposition is that consumers will evaluate differently the brand according to the degree of consistency they perceive between the brand and the website image. Therefore, our hypothesis is the following: attitude toward the brand will vary according

to the level of consistency between website and brand image. Higher levels of consistency lead to a more positive attitude toward the brand after the website visit.

→ Insert Figure 1: Research Model

This study is an exploratory before-after design. The main objective was to explore the effects of a website visit on brand attitude and brand image, by including navigational features and the design of the website. Participants were recruited randomly from a graduate student's directory of a French Business School and contacted by email. After filling out a first part of the questionnaire, each respondent was placed in a forced website exposure situation and visited two websites. Then, a second part of the questionnaire was filled out, dealing with website evaluation. The studied brands were a mobile telephone brand and a French car manufacturer. Their websites had, at the time of the research, only an informational and image-building objective; no products were sold via these two websites. The response rate was about 10% and twelve questionnaires needed to be excluded from the analyses. We obtained a final sample of 90 individuals evaluating both websites.

Results

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 45 and there were slightly more males (56%) than females (44%). Five observations had to be excluded from the analyses because the question controlling their effective website visit was not answered correctly. Therefore, the results are based on a total sample of 175 evaluations.

The dimensionality and internal consistency of each scale were examined using principal component analysis and Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The results indicate that

all scales were one-dimensional and reliable. Six items, based on Chen and Wells (1999) and rated on a seven-point agreement scale, measure attitude toward the website ($\alpha = 0.94$). Attitude toward the brand (Grossbart, Muehling and Kangun, 1986; $\alpha = 0.96$), prior brand attitude (Grossbart, Muehling and Kangun, 1986; $\alpha = 0.95$) and perceived Consistency (Keller and Aaker, 1992; $\alpha = 0.90$) were both measured by three items and evaluated on 7-point bipolar semantic scales.

A 2×2 ANOVA was conducted with attitude toward the brand after the website visit as dependent variable, attitude toward the website and consistency as between-participant factors and prior brand attitude as covariate. Low/high groups on the consistency and website attitude scale were constituted using a conventional median split. The two-way interaction between attitude toward the website and consistency was significant by Hotelling's criterion ($F(1, 167) = 6.77, p < .01$), confirming the hypothesis that high levels of consistency lead to a more positive attitude toward the brand after the website visit.

→ Insert Table 1: Test of Between-Subjects Effects

This difference is significant only for those who had a positive attitude toward the website.

→ Insert Figure 2: Two-way interaction between attitude toward the website and consistency

In fact, planned contrasts revealed that for those who had a positive attitude toward the website, high perceived consistency between brand image and website image leads to a more positive attitude toward the brand [$(M_{low\ consistency} = 5.35)$ vs. $(M_{high\ consistency} = 5.65)$],

$F(1, 163) = 6.59, p = .01$]. On the contrary, for those who had a negative attitude toward the website, higher level of perceived consistency do not generate a more positive brand attitude [$(M_{low\ consistency} = 4.79)$ vs. $(M_{high\ consistency} = 4.42)$, $F(1, 163) = 0.13, p = .72$].

Discussion and conclusion

The main objective of this research was to explore the effects of perceived consistency between brand and website image on brand attitude. The data collection confirmed our hypothesis, as consistency acts as a moderator between website attitude and brand attitude, underlining the importance of consistency in brand communications.

Following Levine (1998, p.8), "everything audiences are exposed to interactively must be built on the images and experiences available through traditional points of contact." In fact, a website should not only be designed to interact with customers, but also with the firm's other communications. This means that a website has to reflect the core values of a brand.

Moreover, its image or identity has to be delivered with coherence not only through various communication channels used by a company but also to all its publics. The danger of creating inconsistencies is a dilution of brand meaning or even a change of the core values of the brand (McEnally and de Chernatony, 1999). And imprecise customer knowledge can lead to perception gaps, which are brand image inconsistencies that can hinder or at least slow down the success of a brand (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1993; Temporal, 1999).

A website is a good mediator of brand values. But the consistency with these values has to exist or be respected on two dimensions, which are on a visual basis and in the

messages expressed by the website. It helps the consumer to locate more easily the brand and its communications, to perceive coherence in the speech of the brand and maybe to develop or reinforce the credibility and trust in the brand he had before. This last point is particularly important on an ecommerce website, where trust enables transactions and online payments.

In addition, visual consistency is not only important across different communication tools used by the brand and toward every public, but also inside the website. Maintain consistency inside the website but visual changes in respect to other websites helps to reduce identity problems of the brand website (Omanson, Cline and Nordhielm, 2002).

Finally, talking about consistency on the website handles also with product offerings and other distribution channels. The product offering on the website has to be complementary with those in traditional distribution channels. Offering different products in traditional stores may impact customer satisfaction and not make them coming back.

In conclusion, ensuring "a high degree of consistency across brand elements helps to create the highest level of awareness and the strongest and most favorable associations possible" (Keller, 1998, p. XXX).

Limitations and Future Research

We highlight several limitations of this research that may affect the generalizability of our findings. First, only two product categories were analyzed. Product categories are not equal in front of the Internet, meaning some are better adapted to this environment than others. And for some product types, the consistency with brand image may be of greater importance. For example luxury goods or prestige goods which are value-

expressive, associated with high symbolic meaning and a strong brand image are more dependant of the perceived image than are functional products. Therefore, the product type should always be taken into account when designing a website.

Second, the type of website plays also a role in the transcription of brand values. An ecommerce website does not pursue the same objectives than an image-building and informative website. Besides consistency, other elements will play an important role, like trust, ease of navigation or interactivity. Therefore, different types of websites within different product categories should be considered for future research.

Finally, another moderator should be included in future analysis, that is prior brand knowledge or brand familiarity. In this research, the two studied brands were known by the whole sample and almost everyone was familiar with the two brands ($Mean_{car}=6.54$, $Median_{car}=7$; $Mean_{phone}=5.49$, $Median_{phone}=6$). Future research could analyze if the effects of consistency may be weaker for less familiar brands, as consumers lack knowledge on which they can perform their attitude.

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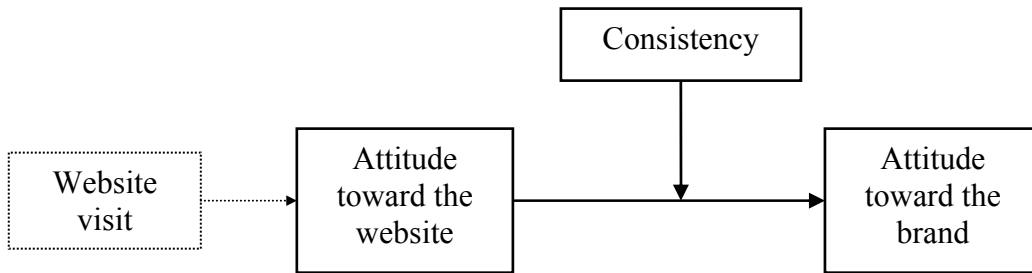
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Tables and Figures

→ *Figure 1: Research Model*



→ *Table 1: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	194.152(a)	4	48.538	90.785	.000
Intercept	14.880	1	14.880	27.831	.000
Prior brand attitude	155.968	1	155.968	291.721	.000
Website attitude	8.993	1	8.993	16.821	.000
Consistency	.001	1	.001	.002	.960
Website attitude * Consistency	3.618	1	3.618	6.766	.010
Error	89.286	167	.535		
Total	4885.222	172			
Corrected Total	283.439	171			

R Squared = .685 (Adjusted R Squared = .677)

→ *Figure 2: Two-way interaction between attitude toward the website and consistency*

