



Beyond technology acceptance: Brand relationships and online brand experience[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper combines insights from marketing and information systems research to arrive at an integrative model of online brand experience. In this model emotional aspects of brand relationship supplement the dimension of technology acceptance to arrive at a more complete understanding of consumer experience with an online brand. The empirical tests involve structural equation modeling and primary data from a survey of 456 users of online search engines. The results demonstrate that trust and perceived usefulness positively affect online brand experience. Positive experiences result in satisfaction and behavioral intentions that in turn lead to the formation of online brand relationship. Interestingly, brand reputation emerges as an important antecedent of trust and perceived ease of use of an online brand.

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1. Introduction

Internet and related technologies have dramatically changed the landscape of global branding. In the last 15 years, online brands have grown from obscurity to become household names with market values that place them in the top 100 world's most valuable brands. In fact, one such name (Google) now tops global ratings with an estimated worth of \$100,039 million (Financial Times, 2009). Traffic, that is the repeated interactions between an online brand and its users, is the key asset underlying this success (Song, Zhang, Xu, & Huang, 2010). Maintaining an active engagement with the user through repeated interactions remains a critical issue for the online brand (Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005; Bridges & Florsheim, 2008; Christodoulides, 2009; Helm, 2007; Kollmann & Suckow, 2008).

Understanding and creating conditions that result in a positive online brand experience remains high-priority within two different fields of academic enquiry. The information systems (IS) tradition, in particular studies based on technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989), conceptualizes online brands as pieces of technology. Taking the system usability view, this research tends to focus on task-related features of the brand and considers user experiences in terms of functional outcomes, such as usefulness or functionality (Kim, 2005;

Koufaris, 2002; Pavlou, Huigang, & Yajiong, 2007). By contrast the marketing literature tends to view online brands as augmented products or services that meet certain customer needs through interaction in computer-mediated environments (Hoffman & Novak, 1996, 2009). Marketing scholars emphasize the emotive aspects of brand experience and subjective evaluations of the brand, stressing the importance of brand personality (Okazaki, 2006), image (Da Silva & Syed Alwi, 2008a, 2008b; Kwon & Lennon, 2009) or brand equity (Christodoulides, de Chernatony, Furrer, Shiu, & Abimbola, 2006; Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2004).

The online brand experience encompasses both the cognitive and the affective states (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Mollen & Wilson, 2010) and a few authors acknowledge the importance of both perspectives (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008; Caruana & Ewing, 2010; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009). For example, some IS scholars focus on hedonic brand experiences and constructs such as fun (Lin, Gregor, & Ewing, 2008). Despite these efforts, in a recent review Taylor and Strutton (2010) conclude that adherence to disciplinary boundaries leads to an incomplete understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of e-marketing and that a unifying framework encompassing interdisciplinary concepts is urgently needed. Responding to the call for a more integrated approach, this study aims to combine theoretical insights from marketing and IS research to arrive at a model of the online brand experience. The model extends the notion of experiencing the brand beyond usability (Flavian, Guinaliu, & Gurrea, 2006), loyalty (Caruana & Ewing, 2010) or satisfaction (Koufaris, 2002), to include the emotive responses and connections with the brand, namely brand relationships. While practitioners recognize these aspect of online brand experience as being critical to the success (Rappaport, 2007), academic research largely overlooks them (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). The investigation focuses on search engines. Compared with online retail

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brands and online purchasing (Caruana & Ewing, 2010; Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2006; Ha & Stoel, 2009; Kim & Jihyun, 2009), the internet search engines represent an under-researched phenomenon. Yet, the search engines provide a particularly poignant context for analyzing brand relationships. The absence of direct sales means that online brand experiences are both narrower and more immediate (Petre, Minocha, & Roberts, 2006) increasing the emphasis on the quality of the experience and the importance of building long-term relationships with the users (Helm, 2007).

2. Conceptual development

2.1. Online brand experience

Online brands emerge as a result of advancements in information and communication technologies. In one sense, an online brand is just a brand in that it incorporates a name or a symbol and a set of product and service features that are associated with that particular name (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2004). Like its offline counterpart, an online brand represents an identifiable product augmented in such a way that customers or users perceive it as valuable and different from competitive products. The subjective perceptions of an integrated bundle of information and experiences evoke in the mind of a consumer, a certain personality presence (Okazaki, 2006) and performance (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhotra, 2005).

The context in which the consumer experiences the brand is a key distinguishing feature of an online brand (Christodoulides, 2009; Hoffman & Novak, 1996). The online contexts tend to be information rich, dynamic, crowded market spaces characterized by excessive information flow and an emphasis on technological innovation (Helm, 2007; Simmons, 2008; Wu, Gautam, Geng, & Whinston, 2004). The virtual nature of the computer-mediated environment and the associated lack of physical clues heighten the challenges of intangibility and uncertainty (Kollmann & Suckow, 2008). At the same time, these environments open up the possibility for interactivity and a real-time brand experience where customers are empowered to engage with the brand and with other customers (Moynagh & Worsley, 2002). In fact, the continuous two-way interaction with a brand, or its traffic, represents the key asset and indicator of success (Song et al., 2010). Online brands rely on the repeated interaction with users to generate income through advertising, licensing or subscriptions in addition to, and instead of, direct revenues from sales (Helm, 2007; Rowley, 2004). A continuous active relationship with the user remains a critical issue for the brands' survival (Christodoulides, 2009; Kollmann & Suckow, 2008; Song et al., 2010).

Online brand experience (OBE) captures the individual's internal subjective response to the contact with an online brand. OBE derives from the concept of customer experience (Arnold, Reynolds, Ponder, & Lueg, 2005) and involves cognitive and affective states that are multidimensional and individual to each consumer (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007). OBE captures the rational, cognitive, and goal-oriented responses to a brand as well as the emotional, affective processing of brand experiences (Rose et al., 2011). For example, experiential outcomes include task-related phenomena such as usability and functionality of an online brand (Flavian et al., 2006; Petre et al., 2006) and hedonic experiences such as fun or enjoyment (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008; Lin et al., 2008). OBE represent a key consideration for practitioners and the question of effective design of the user experience is at the forefront of managerial agenda (Hausman & Sieke, 2009, Rappaport, 2007).

Individuals interact with the online brands across a diverse range of activities leading to different behaviors and experiences (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). The diversity of conceptualizations of OBE reflects the variety in online brands. Internet experience (Nysveen & Pedersen, 2004), customer experience in online environments (Novak, Hoffman, & Yiu-Fai, 2000), total consumer experience

(Petre et al., 2006), website brand experience (Ha & Perks, 2005) and online experience (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008; Janda & Ybarra, 2006) are but a few examples of different terms that capture OBE. The current paper views experience as an experiential response to the operator environment (Mollen and Wilson, 2010) and defines online brand experience as a holistic response to the stimuli within website environment.

2.2. Technology acceptance model

The problem of user involvement with an online brand attracts considerable attention among information systems (IS) researchers. Understanding conditions under which a technology product or service will be embraced by users remains a key issue in this research. IS studies address the antecedents and outcomes of OBE typically within the theoretical framework of the technology acceptance model (TAM) (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, & Davis, 2003). TAM postulates that the attitudes one holds about the technology do influence the adoption and use of that technology. In particular, the TAM assumes that a person's beliefs about their ability to use a piece of technology and their subjective evaluation of the usefulness of that technology are the key determinants of behavioral intentions. Empirical studies provide a validation for these assertions in online contexts (Bruner & Kumar, 2005; Ha & Stoel, 2009; Hernandez, Jimenez, & Martin, 2009; Palvia, 2009; Pavlou et al., 2007).

Recent applications of TAM include extensions of the original framework. Studies expand the original model to account for other effects of technology usage beyond and in addition to behavioral intentions including, for example, satisfaction (Wixom & Todd, 2005), loyalty (Flavian et al., 2006), unplanned purchases (Koufaris, 2002), and positive word of mouth (Palvia, 2009). Studies incorporate additional antecedents of attitude or behavioral intentions to more accurately depict conditions under which a technology is perceived as useful (Venkatesh et al., 2003). For example, Gefen, Karahanna, and Straub (2003) and Palvia (2009) focus on trust; Pavlou et al. (2007) consider the mitigating role of perceived uncertainty on purchase intentions. Finally, some conceptualizations amend the original model to account not only for the adoption of technology but also for its use. Pavlou and Fygenson (2006) study distinguishes between two related behaviors: obtaining information and purchasing. Hernandez et al. (2009) compare experienced and inexperienced e-customers to show how adoption differs from acceptance of e-commerce. These modifications expand the model but preserve its original message: the model depicts a usability view of technology adoption where the user's attitude and behavior is primarily a function of cognitive and goal-oriented interactions with a brand that rest on its task-related and the technical performance.

2.3. Brand relationships

Marketing theory argues that brands provide emotional benefits to consumers (Pawle & Cooper, 2006). Feelings matter: consumers affectively bond with specific brands to form brand relationships (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998; Dall'Olmo Riley & de Chernatony, 2000; Fournier, 1998). Two aspects indicate the existence of a relationship between the consumer and the brand: the emotional connection and communication (Veloutsou, 2007). The emotional dimension of the bond, including the self-connection and the immediacy, is part of the relationship (Fournier, 1998; Pawle & Cooper, 2006). According to social psychology theory, communication forms the other dimension of the relational bond (Falk & Wagner, 1985; Hinde, 1997), a view supported in the literature on brand relationships (Veloutsou, 2007; 2009; Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009). Consumers who form deep relationships with brands tend to be actively involved in two-way communication process, that is, in providing and receiving information (Veloutsou, 2007). Affections towards a brand translate

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