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Relationships among Brand Identity, Brand Image and Brand Preference: Differences between Cyber and Extension Retail Brands over Time ☆

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Abstract

This study examines the relationships among brand identity, brand image, and brand preference in the context of cyber (pure online) and offline-based extension (traditional brick-and-mortar to online) retail brands over time. We test a conceptual model with survey data gathered over three time periods. Our results show that offline-based extension brands have an advantage over cyber brands when it comes to translating a brand identity into a successful brand image, especially in the early Internet stages (i.e., introduction and elaboration stages). Offline-based extension brands gain positive spillover effects from their offline-based counterparts, but such effects take time, and are not evident in the early Internet stage. Both types of brands have to work hard in the introductory stage to create a successful brand image that manifests into consumer preference for the brand. With regards to Internet use, we found that cyber brands have a slight disadvantage when moving from the elaboration stage to the fortification stage.
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Keywords: Cyber brand; Extension brand; Brand identity; Brand image; Brand preference; Internet stage; Over time

Introduction

Brands are among the most important intangible assets possessed by firms, contributing to greater value and market success (De Asis 2001; Shankar, Azar, and Fuller 2008). The brand premium is based on the equity that brands gain from being familiar, credible, and trustworthy, which lowers information costs and perceived risk involved with a purchase (Shankar, Azar, and Fuller 2008). A brand's worth is intimately tied to consumer reactions to product(s) or service(s) carrying a particular brand name. Recognizing this issue, much scholarly interest in the branding literature has centered on identifying ways of obtaining favorable consumer perceptions toward brands. For example, Shankar, Azar, and Fuller (2008) demonstrated that consumers' perceptions of a brand contribute to the brand's relative strength in a market, which drives a brand's value in the marketplace.

The Internet has provided a particularly fruitful arena for branding (Bart et al. 2005). Online firms such as Amazon.com invest a great deal of resources in building a brand that elicits favorable reactions from consumers, as such reactions drive future purchase behavior. Of particular importance is eliciting favorable evaluations toward Internet brands that differ in their initial dispositions: cyber brands that only exist online (i.e., pure online brands) and have to build a brand from inception, and offline-based extension brands with marketplace counterparts (i.e., traditional brick-and-mortar brands) that serve as valuable bases for branding activities.

Prior studies have shown that cyber and offline-based extension brands are likely to evoke different responses from consumers (Bart et al. 2005; Degeratu, Rangaswamy, and Wu 2000). Several studies also suggest that offline-based counterparts have an advantage over pure online brands. For example, Sääksjärvi and Samiee (2007) demonstrate that offline-based brands are likely to have an advantage over pure online brands since they can gain positive spillover effects from their offline-

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based counterparts. However, the extent to which such advantages are sustainable over time has not been examined. Although offline-based extension brands may have advantages in the beginning of their "Internet stage," such effects may disappear after pure online brands have established themselves as viable competitors. A study of brand perceptions over time affords us the opportunity to uncover whether such patterns exist with respect to cyber and offline-based extension brands. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to explore the relationships among brand identity, brand image, Internet use, and brand preference for cyber and extension retail brands over time. The focus of the investigation is on the shift in consumer perceptions along the four constructs of interest to identify the advantages of each brand type over time. This investigation makes a contribution to the literature by examining how changes in core branding components affect consumer preferences for cyber and extension retail brands over time.

Conceptual Model

Degeratu, Rangaswamy, and Wu (2000) relied on information integration theory for examining how consumers integrate information available to them online as well as offline when evaluating Internet brands. According to their findings, the type of information that is important online and offline varies. Consumers often lack sensory information about online brands and, thereby, to a much greater extent rely on other kinds of information. Since consumers tend to lack any brand-related information regarding cyber retail brands at inception, other types of information such as price or product attributes become more important than the brand. This situation is exacerbated when the brand is just establishing itself online. In contrast, consumers have experience with marketplace brands and, therefore, tend to rely more on the brand and their prior evaluations of the brand instead of searching for new information (e.g., pertaining to price or product attributes). In this case, the brand name becomes a surrogate for other types of information that may be difficult to acquire. This suggests that consumers are likely to evaluate online and offline brands differently, and that such evaluations may vary over time.

Aaker and Keller (1996), Aaker, Keller, and Joachimstaler (2000), and Keller (1993, 2003) identify two main sources of consumer preference for a particular brand: brand identity and brand image. Brand identity is defined as a unique set of brand associations that firms aim to create or maintain, whereas brand image is defined as consumer perceptions regarding a brand (Keller 2003, p. 66). Brand preferences over time mainly shift due to changes in these two components (McEnally and de Chernatony 1999). In line with Shankar, Azar, and Fuller (2008), we conceptualize brand identity and brand image as containing several subcomponents, with brand identity consisting of brand awareness, purpose, differentiation, and offerings (de Chernatony 1999), and brand image pertaining to brand credibility, brand character, consumers' overall attitude towards the brand, and consumers' feelings for the brand (de Chernatony 1999). In our conceptualization, brand image serves as a mediator between brand identity and preference. Brand identity represents how firms *aspire* to be perceived, whereas brand image refers to how they *are* perceived. Brand identity does not directly influence consumer preferences. Rather, consumers interpret the firm's identity and translate it into an image (Keller 2003), and the image in turn influences consumer preferences (Keller 1993; Martínez and de Chernatony 2004).

We also include Internet use in our model as a component of preference to convey the fact that consumers' experiences with a particular shopping channel may influence their preferences towards brands in that channel (Bart et al. 2005; Eastlick and Lotz 1999). Studies addressing Internet use show that consumers who extensively use a particular channel (such as the Internet) are more likely to differentiate the brands sold through that channel than shoppers who rarely use the channel (e.g., Eastlick and Lotz 1999). The marketing literature suggests four main components that drive the use of a given shopping channel: usage history, time spent (use duration), number of purchases (familiarity with channel), and spending (Bart et al. 2005; Eastlick 1996; Shim et al. 2001). The proposed conceptual framework modeling consumer perceptions of cyber and offline-based extension brands over time is shown in Fig. 1.

Hypotheses

On the Internet, a brand can be said to evolve in three stages: introduction, elaboration, and fortification, analogous to Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis' (1986) model of brand lifecycles. In the introductory stage, firms need to develop a set of activities to establish a brand's positioning in the market. As the external attributes are more important than brand-related aspects in this phase, it is important to develop a strong identity that can leverage positive associations with the brand (Degeratu, Rangaswamy, and Wu 2000; Keller 2003). In the elaboration stage, when the brand is becoming more important, the strategy should shift toward enhancing the value of the brand. In this stage, the key sources for brand equity should be preserved and amplified (Shankar, Azar, and Fuller 2008) and the positive and unique brand associations created in the introductory stage should be fortified (Keller 1993). In the fortification stage, the brand is linked with the firm's other

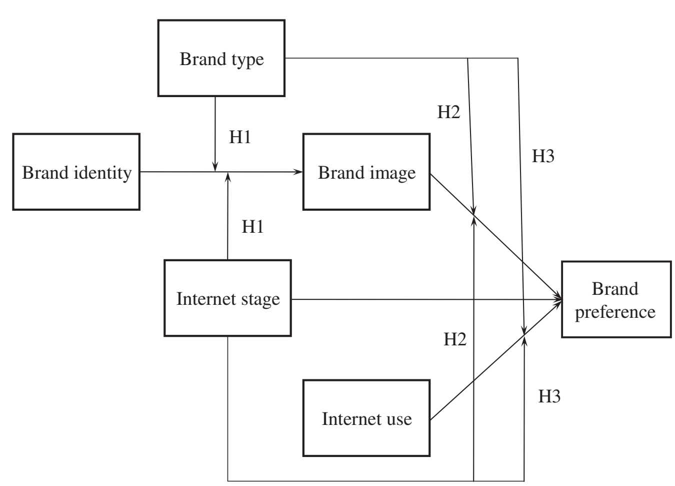

Fig. 1. Measurement model.

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