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Consistency between brand image and website image: Does it matter?

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Abstract: This research examines how the perception of consistency between brand image and website image affects brand attitude. With the massive development of the internet, most of the brick-and-mortar companies created their own website. Two prevailing strategies emerged: some companies transposed 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 representation of a brand on the internet is limitless, it is not sure that brand image perceived by website visitors is consistent with their prior brand image. Results provide empirical evidence of a moderating effect of perceived consistency on the relation between website and brand attitude.

Keywords: consistency; brand attitude; website attitude.

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1 Introduction

With the advent of the web, almost every traditional offline brand created its own website. Two prevailing strategies emerged and were pursued by brick-and-mortar companies: some transposed their brand with the corresponding name, image and values to the website and others created a new brand name to exist on the net. The dominant approach was the transposition 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 research seeks to address the issue concerning the perception of consistency between

brand image and website image by the visitor and its effects on brand attitude. In a study made by Dynamic Markets, 97% of the interviewed companies underlined the importance of a consistent and well-managed website, leading to business improvement or benefit (Tridion.com, 2005). These results highlight the significance for marketers to ensure the consistency between what is communicated via the website with the core values of the brand and other information released by the brand (Stuart and Jones, 2004). Despite the common belief among researchers that websites are a form of interactive advertising (Karson and Korgaonkar, 2001; Macias, 2003), they are much more than that. Composed of several pages, they offer detailed information about the products and the brand, associated to other functions such as personalisation and feed-back. And due to the wide range of graphic opportunities, the representation of a brand on the internet is not really limited. In addition to these intrinsic characteristics, the internet provides consumers the opportunity to interact with the website, the company or the brand. It holds the potential of being “a desired, engaging and positive form of communication instead of intrusive, annoying, or unwanted” (Macias, 2003). For these reasons, it is not sure that brand image perceived by website visitors is consistent with their prior brand image. In fact, a brand conveys a certain image besides the website, generated by previous experiences with the brand, through interaction, communication or product usage. Therefore, it is important for a company to raise the issue of consistency between brand image in the traditional and the virtual world. Building a strong brand on the internet implies for marketers providing the right type of experience to customers, in order to link the desired thoughts, images and perceptions 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 logical and incoherent, does the existence of a website have an impact on the evaluation the consumer makes of the brand? Only brick and mortar brands are considered in this research, defined as brands possessed by companies that have a physical presence and offer face-to-face consumer experiences, as opposed 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 websites is analysed. These sections are followed by the presentation of the research model and methods used. Finally, we provide the results and discuss the implications of our findings.

2 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, pp.7, 8)

Osgood and Tannenbaum (1955, p.43), who are at the origin of congruency theory, stipulate that “changes in evaluation are always in the direction of increased congruity with the existing frame of reference”. Several researchers have since applied congruency theory to a wide variety of research domains (e.g.,: Kahle and Homer, 1985;

Kamins, 1990; Solomon et al., 1992; Graeff, 1996). The theory of cognitive consistency suggests that consistent beliefs about an object are desirable and related to more positive overall evaluations of these objects (Heider, 1946; Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955). Attitude theory confirms these findings, demonstrating that “a lack of consistency can lead to ambivalence, resulting in less favourable 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 et al. (1991) propose that the degree of perceived fit between the extension product and the brand name determines the evaluation of brand extensions. Other researchers have 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 et al., 2000). The rationale behind is that the consumer has to consider the extension as logical 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 scholars have analysed the congruency effect relative to country of production and brand name on consumer 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 have analysed the concept of consistency or congruency in the context of celebrity endorsement by examining matches between characteristics of celebrities or spokespersons with characteristics of the products they endorse. The conversion between the endorser and the brand leads to increased advertising effectiveness (Kahle and Homer, 1985), higher credibility and knowledge of the spokesperson (Kamins, 1990; Kamins and Gupta, 1994; Lynch and Schuler, 1994) and a more positive attitude toward the brand or the advertisement (Kamins, 1990; Misra and Beatty, 1990; Kamins and Gupta, 1994). Solomon et al. (1992) investigate 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 products of the sponsored brand are used during the event) or on an image basis (when brand image is related to the image of the event) (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999).

Other researchers have 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) show that misfit can lead to a decline in the consumer-brand relationship. On the contrary, the outcomes of fit are brand reinforcement, delight or attraction.

As far as internet is concerned, little research has been carried out on the concept of consistency or fit. Rodgers (2003–2004) applies the image-transfer theory in a sponsorship context to the internet and analyses 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, 2003–2004, p.69)

With regards to advertising research applied to the internet, Moore et al. (2005) show that consumers develop more positive attitudes toward an advertisement when it is congruent with the context of the website in which it is embedded.

Considering past research, 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, colours and attributes helps the consumer to remember the brand. Moreover, as Levine (1998) reports, the consumer’s online experience must be consistent with personal expectations. “Everything audiences are exposed to interactively must be built on the images and experiences available through traditional points of contact” (Levine 1998, p.8). 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 wants to communicate and how they can involve the consumer in the creation of added value. Furthermore, they have to consider how consistency of the message is to be maintained (McEnally and de Chernatony, 1999) and expressed through the website.

3 Attitude toward the website

Advertising effectiveness is certainly one of the main internet research streams. Largely based on traditional advertising research, the main findings are transposed and investigated on the internet. For example, several authors have measured consumers’ attitude toward an advertisement, defined as

“predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavourable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion.” (MacKenzie et al., 1986, pp.130, 131)

These authors, among others, demonstrate 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 et al., 1986; Brown and Stayman, 1992).

As stated previously, an increasing number of researchers consider 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 et al. (2002) adapt the definition of attitude toward the ad (MacKenzie et al., 1986) to a website, defined as “a web surfers’ predisposition to respond favourably or

unfavourably to web content in natural exposure situations” (Chen and Wells, 1999, p.28). This variable may be considered as an indicator of website value. By establishing a parallel between advertising research and the internet, the relationship between attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the brand (Shimp, 1981; Batra and Ray, 1986; Brown and Stayman, 1992) is transposed to the internet. Following Chen and Wells (1999), Bruner and Kumar (2000), Bruner et al. (2000) and Chen et al. (2002), attitude toward websites 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 organisation or as a brand carrier (Palmer and Griffith, 1998; Chen and Wells, 1999). Therefore, and according to Bruner et al. (2000), Jee and Lee (2002), Raney et al. (2003) and Richard and Chandra (2005), we consider that attitude toward websites 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. It constitutes a good indicator of general attitude toward websites and was validated independently from its original authors in several studies (e.g., Wu, 1999; Chen et al., 2002). We will explore the effect of this measurement on brand attitude after the website visit, moderated by the perceived consistency between website and brand image.

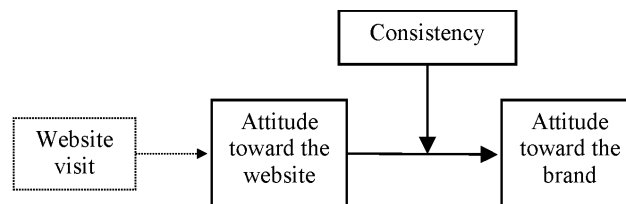
As exposed above, the primary object of this research is the consistency between perceived brand image and website image. More precisely, the moderating effect of consistency on the relation between attitude toward the website and attitude toward the brand is investigated.

Previous research demonstrated that consistency is an important issue in many fields of research but is yet not investigated in the internet context. Our main proposition is that consumers will evaluate a brand differently according to the degree of consistency they perceive between brand and website image. Therefore, the following hypothesis, illustrated in Figure 1, is put forward:

Consistency moderates the relationship between website attitude and brand attitude.

Higher levels of consistency are expected to strengthen the effect of attitude toward the website on brand attitude and improve attitude toward the brand after the website visit.

Figure 1 Research model



The subsequent section describes the research methodology used in the data collection.

4 Research methodology

This study is an exploratory before-after design based on a convenience sample. Participants were recruited from an alumni student's directory of a French Business School and contacted by email. After filling out the first part of the questionnaire, each respondent was asked to visit two websites as they would visit them for their own purpose. A question was introduced in the questionnaire in order to control their effective website visit. Then, respondents completed the second part of the questionnaire, dealing with website evaluation. The brands being studied were a mobile telephone brand and a French car manufacturer. Both brands were very well known and almost every respondent was familiar with the two brands ($Car_{mean} = 6.54$, $Phone_{mean} = 5.49$). Moreover, no difference concerning brand attitude was found in this research ($M_{car} = 5.06$, $M_{mobile\ phone} = 5.35$, $F(1, 173) = 2.218$, $p = 0.138$).

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 as they had too many missing values. We obtained a final sample of 90 individuals evaluating both websites.

Measurements

Measurements for several constructs were derived from existing scales or studies in the literature and adapted to suit the context of our study. The dimensionality and internal consistency of each scale were examined using principal component analysis and Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Results indicate that all scales were one-dimensional and reliable.

Attitude toward the brand after website visit and prior brand attitude are measured on a 7-point bipolar semantic scale composed of three items (bad/good, negative/positive, unfavourable/favourable) derived from Grossbart et al. (1986). Their internal consistency was good with $\alpha = 0.96$ for attitude toward the brand after the website visit and $\alpha = 0.95$ for prior brand attitude.

Attitude toward the website is rated on a seven-point agreement scale, based on four items of Chen and Wells* (1999) original scale and two items added by ourselves (I feel comfortable in surfing this website*, I'm satisfied with the service provided by this website*, I would like to visit this website again in the future*, Compared with other websites, I would rate this one as one of the worst/one of the best*, I think this is a good website, I like this website; $\alpha = 0.94$).

Perceived consistency was adapted from Keller and Aaker (1992) and measured on three items (bad/good fit between website and brand image; not at all/very logical for the brand; not at all/very appropriate for the brand, $\alpha = 0.90$) and evaluated on 7-point bipolar semantic scales.

5 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.

A 2 × 2 ANOVA (see Table 1) 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 ($F(1, 167) = 6.77, p < 0.01$), confirming the hypothesis that high levels of consistency lead to a more positive attitude toward the brand after the website visit.

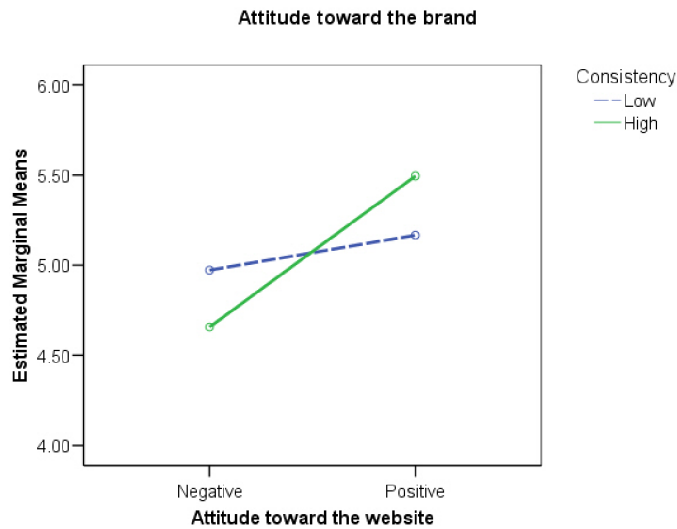
Table 1 Test of between-subjects effects

Source	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Corrected model	194.152 (a)	4	48.538	90.785	0.000
Intercept	14.880	1	14.880	27.831	0.000
Prior Att _{brand}	155.968	1	155.968	291.721	0.000
Website attitude	8.993	1	8.993	16.821	0.000
Consistency	0.001	1	0.001	0.002	0.960
Att _{site} × Consistency	3.618	1	3.618	6.766	0.010
Error	89.286	167	0.535		
Total	4885.222	172			
Corrected total	283.439	171			

$R^2 = 0.685$ (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.677$).

This difference is significant only for those who had a positive attitude toward the website (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Two-way interaction between attitude toward the website and consistency (see online version for colours)



In fact, planned contrasts reveal 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 [$(M_{\text{low consistency}} = 5.35)$ vs. $(M_{\text{high consistency}} = 5.65)$, $F(1, 163) = 6.59, p = 0.01$]. On the contrary, for those who had a negative attitude toward the website, higher levels of perceived consistency do not generate a more positive brand attitude [$(M_{\text{low consistency}} = 4.79)$ vs. $(M_{\text{high consistency}} = 4.42)$, $F(1, 163) = 0.13, p = 0.72$].

6 Conclusion and managerial implications

The main objective of this research was to explore the effects of perceived consistency between brand and website image on brand attitude. 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. By ensuring a high degree of consistency between different brand elements, a company can create higher levels of awareness and stronger and more favourable brand associations (Keller, 1998). On the contrary, 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). 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 et al., 1993; Temporal, 1999).

For many brands, a website is an important point of contact with consumers. It is therefore a good mediator of brand values, reaching a large number of consumers. By providing information and offering additional services to customers, it has become an important tool for customer relationships management. Moreover, it is also very useful in attracting new customers. Being exposed to an inconsistent website compared to prior brand knowledge can lead to develop negative brand attitudes and maybe lead the visitors to abandon the site and even the brand.

Being consistent with the core values and the visual identity of the brand is consequently fundamental in order to maintain coherent communications. The website can help to strengthen or reinforce existing brand values. This is particularly important for image-brands much more than for functional brands. For example, the luxury industry was reticent to develop websites or even sell over the internet, not being sure that they would transmit a consistent image through this medium. And the question was how to transpose prestige to the internet.

The same problem occurred for more traditional or authentic brands. In fact, every brand is not adapted to the internet and the image of some 'old' brands was inconsistent with the innovative and technological image of this media. Some brands changed their name to exist on the internet and, in some cases, the internet served to change and rejuvenate brand image.

But besides consistency, other elements play also a significant role. In fact, by analysing results in more detail, it is important to underline that for those who had a negative website attitude, level of consistency does not moderate their attitude toward the brand. This highlights the importance of website quality and the need to control website execution.

Another relevant point is that consistency helps consumers to locate the brand more easily on the net, to perceive unity in the message and information delivered by the brand and maybe to develop or reinforce credibility and trust. This last point is particularly

important on an e-commerce 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 within the website. Maintaining intra-website consistency but also visual changes in respect to other websites helps to reduce brand website identity crises (Omanson et al., 2002).

Consistency is an important issue for international brands because it raises the question of being consistent with the international image and national or local markets and customers. Many organisations chose to develop individually designed websites, in order to adapt their content to local customs. It is therefore important to control the coherence between all these different websites.

In conclusion, 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, in order to induce positive brand associations. But the website can also be used to be complementary to other communications or to get round legal problems. Therefore, many brands use the internet as an important advertising tool, complementary to television or magazine ads.

Moreover, brand image or identity has to be delivered coherently not only through various communication channels but also to all target publics. Therefore, as the coherent transmission of company and brand values is not always that easy, brand managers have to control regularly the perceived brand image through the website and its consistency with other brand communications.

We highlight several limitations of this research, making generalisations difficult. These limitations call need for future research.

First, these findings are limited to only two product categories, albeit two major international brands. As already highlighted, product categories are not equal when it comes to the internet, meaning some are better adapted to this environment than others. And for some product types, 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 on the perceived image than are functional products. Therefore, the product type should always be taken into account when designing a website and future research should focus on the analysis of several product categories.

Second, the type of website also plays a role in the transposition of brand values. An e-commerce website does not pursue the same objectives than an image-building and informative website. Apart from consistency, other elements play an important role, like trust, ease of navigation or interactivity and we did not control for differences concerning these features between the two studied websites. Therefore, future research should consider websites differing concerning their type (e-commerce, image-building, corporate, ...), their navigation complexity or their quality within different product categories.

Third, research was based on a convenience sample, chosen from an alumni's directory, not representative of the internet population and relatively small. In addition, respondents didn't get assigned a specific task in order to visit the website and their visit duration was not controlled. Therefore, future research should administer questionnaires under controlled website exposure.

Fourth, another moderator could be included in future analysis, which is brand familiarity. In this research, the two brands under scrutiny were known by the whole sample and almost every respondent was familiar with the two brands ($Car_{mean} = 6.54$,

Car_{median} = 7; Phone_{mean} = 5.49, Phone_{median} = 6). Mature brands better resist change, as beliefs and associations about a familiar brand are strong and perceived as relevant and personal (Low and Lamb, 2000). In this case, inconsistent brand communications may not be appreciated. However, as Sjödin and Törn (2006) explain, brand image incongruity can lead to positive brand evaluations, depending on whether the incongruity is resolved and assimilated by the individual or not. Marketers sometimes knowingly use incoherent communications with the established brand image. Future research could therefore analyse if effects of brand image inconsistencies change according to brand familiarity, maturity of the brand or individual succeeding in resolving incongruity (Sjödin and Törn, 2006).

Finally, talking about consistency concerning e-commerce websites also relates to product offerings and other distribution channels. In fact, product offerings on a website should be complementary with those in traditional distribution channels. Future research could explore if different product offerings in traditional stores impact customer satisfaction and negatively influence them to not return.

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