Website Image Transfer: Perception of Uninformative Online Ads

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The emergence and fast development of Internet has challenged conventional wisdom about ads. One significant change is the appearance of uninformative online ads that are regarded as “poor ads” in the traditional media. The present paper investigates two possible types of omissions/ambiguities from such online ads, namely, product category related- and brand personality related-information. We argue that two dimensions of site image – website function and personality can influence consumers’ perception of uninformative ads. Consumers may infer or “restore” the missing/ambiguous information from such ads in either a systematic or heuristic way. The underlying psychological process of site image transfer is proposed. We conclude that if the results of site image transfer are congruent with the actual information about the product in the ads, consumers will form a favorable attitude toward the site, the ads, and the brand, and ultimately a higher purchase intention.

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Method

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in business administration classes. The information was presented via a series of internet websites and emotional responses and comments were collected with a web-based survey. Participants were asked to read corporate social responsibility information about a fictitious company. The corporate social responsibility information was presented as if it were from an objective third party, The Calvert Group. This information was used to present positive information (e.g., the company was environmentally friendly, produced high quality and safe products, etc.), negative information (e.g., the company was not environmentally friendly, produce low quality and unsafe products, etc.), or mixed (e.g., the company was environmentally friendly but produced low quality and unsafe products, etc.). Participants were either asked to imagine they were about to make a purchase from this company or they were told they had just made a purchase from this company. Their emotional response toward the purchase situation was assessed, and in an open-ended response format, they were asked what thoughts and feelings they had, what decision they would make, and what they would do in this situation.

Results

As expected, respondents receiving positive information experienced significantly more positive emotion (M=5.24) than either the negative or the mixed conditions (M=2.59; t(161)=10.79, p<.01). Additionally, the negative condition was rated as being significantly more negative (M=4.98) than either the positive or mixed conditions (M=2.66; t(161)=10.68, p<.01). Finally, participants exposed to conflicting information experienced significantly higher levels of subjective emotional ambivalence (M=3.59) compared to participants in either the positive or negative conditions (M=2.54; t(161)=4.68, p<.01).

Based on the content analysis of three independent coders, consumers exposed to positive information did not seem to actively engage in coping strategies. However, consumers exposed to negative information engaged in problem-focused coping, both confrontive and planful problem solving, as well as social support coping. Those exposed to conflicting information seemed to engage in emotion-focused coping.

For participants exposed to negative information, specific examples of confrontive coping included statements about their displeasure with the company’s behavior, switching companies, and writing letters to the local paper about the company’s substandard levels or writing letters to the company or CEO to inform them of their displeasure. Planful problem solving strategies included plans to return the product, look for alternatives, or buy from another company. Following a purchase decision, respondents were still upset about their situation and engaged in similar coping strategies, however, it seemed they were less likely to engage in complaining behavior and seemed more likely to keep the product.

Instances of social support coping were also found with the negative information. Participants stated intentions to engage in negative word of mouth or complaining behavior, stating they would talk to friends and family to tell them about this company’s negative business practices and to avoid this company and any of their products.

Consumers presented with conflicting information engaged in emotion-focused coping, mostly distancing and positive reappraisal. Some respondents were found with use social support coping. Prior to purchase, participants tried to see the company in a positive light, wanted the company to be good, and thought they weren’t doing anything wrong by thinking about this purchase. Following a decision, participants tried to justify or rationalize their decision and continued to reappraise the situation.

These findings are consistent with research in the area of coping and emotions. Negative emotions have been found to be negatively related to some emotion-focused coping (reappraisal) and positively related to some forms of problem-focused coping (Folkman and Lazarus 1988). Coping responses related to conflicting mixed emotions have not been assessed in previous research but it is understandable that consumers would try to reappraise the purchase situation, especially after having already made a purchase decision. Future research should further examine the relationship between emotions and consumer coping responses.

References


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Extended Abstract

This paper examines the role of context effects in online advertising, aiming to provide marketers with appropriate strategies to promote products in the new media. In the traditional media, effective ads typically provide vivid and specific information. An online ad is considered effective if it arouses curiosity and induces consumers to click through it. Thus, unlike traditional advertising, online ads often contain low level of information, due to high interactivity of the new media (Sicilia, Ruiz, and Munuera, 2005). Such ads may omit two types of information, product category related and personality related (Aaker, 1997).

Online ads often contain low level of information, due to high interactivity of the new media (Sicilia, Ruiz, and Munuera, 2005). Such ads may omit two types of information, product category related and personality related (Aaker, 1997).
Studies in social psychology have found that human judgment is highly context-dependent. Ad context can influence consumers’ perception and evaluation of ads, and thus ad effectiveness (e.g., Singh and Churchill, 1987). In the present paper, we address one important emerging context on consumers’ judgment due to the development of Internet–website image. From an associative memory net viewpoint, we define website image as “consumers’ perception of a website as reflected by the associations related to the website (including sub-sites) held in memory.”

We study website image from two dimensions: function and personality. Function of a website refers to the types of products and services it provides, which is reflected in the context and design of the website. Following the literature, we use brand image of a website to define its personality.

In this paper, we propose that function and personality of a website will impact consumers’ perception of and attitude towards online ads through an image transfer process. Site image transfer is defined as “consumers use their perceived site image to infer product-category related- and brand-personality related-information in uninformative online ads.”

The first set of hypotheses is concerned with the contingency under which such image transfer occurs. Website function is more likely to influence consumers’ perception of the product category of a brand, while website personality is more likely to influence their perception of brand personality in ambiguous online ads than in unambiguous ones.

The second set of hypotheses is related to the psychological process of website image transfer. We propose that consumers can “restore” or “interpret” the two types of omissions in online ads through either a systematic or heuristic way, depending on the level of cognitive resources.

The third set of hypotheses deals with specific context (website image) of an online ad. With a high (low) level of cognitive resources, consumers systematically (heuristically) interpret or “restore” the missing product category related-information in an ambiguous online ad. In contrast, when cognitive resources are highly available, personality-based image transfer is less likely to occur (Martin, 1991; Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1997), while consumers engage in personality-based image, with a low level of cognitive resources at the time of ad exposure.

The last hypothesis indicates the consequences of site image transfer. Depending on the relevance between the actual and perceived (through a process of site image transfer) information, consumers’ attitude-toward-website may vary. The higher is the relevance, the more favorable is consumers’ attitude-toward-website, and vice versa.

An Influential Minority: Reaching the New Values-Based Consumers

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Introduction

According to Morris Holbrook (1996), consumer values refer to the experience of a relativistic consumption preference, while consumer values are “the standards or criteria on which the former depends.” Beyond this clarification, the exact definition of values remains fuzzy throughout the social sciences (see Rohan, 2000 and Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). For the purposes of this paper, values will be defined as “desirable transsituational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles” (Schwartz, 1994, p. 21).

As guiding principles, values operate in all consumption contexts. Yet the plurality of consumer values is not well understood. Much consumer behavior theory has assumed that “mainstream” American values are the ones that matter most. If we are concerned with trends, history would suggest that the “mainstream” is not the place to look. Significant social change begins not at the center but at the margins. There are many indications that a values-based social trend has been emerging in recent years, not from the center but from what was an initially a marginal edge. Evidence of this can be seen in the social responsibility clauses of corporate mission statements, the appearance of organic and fair trade food sections in “mainstream” stores, and consumer demand for hybrid cars.

One Quarter of American Consumers

To understand this trend, sociologists Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson analyzed the role of "transformational values" in American life (Ray & Anderson, 2000). Over thirteen years, they gathered more than 100,000 survey responses and conducted hundreds of focus groups. Ray and Anderson’s 70+-item scale assessed consumer views related to gender, success, spirituality, altruism, optimism, financial solvency, corporate power, cultural diversity, violence, political polarization, environmental destruction, and global interconnectedness. This combination of values is not normally captured by national values surveys.

Ray and Anderson found that over 50 million adults in the United States (about one-quarter of American consumers), and approximately 80-90 million in Europe, hold values that are markedly different from the mainstream in the measured dimensions. These values drive consumption decisions for this mostly middle-class group. They have money to spend ($228.9 billion per year, according to www.lohas.com/about.htm), but their spending is not typical of mainstream American consumers.

Ray and Anderson see these consumers as catalysts of cultural change, and thus call them “cultural creatives.” They are difficult to reach through typical media and publicity channels because they hold worldviews that are in opposition to most national media and are not covered by, or targeted by, mainstream media (Ray and Anderson, 2000).

Research Questions and Methodology

Interviews conducted during the initial phase of this study suggest that these new values-based consumers watch little to no television, read multiple independently published news sources, and get most of their news online. However, it is not clear what forms of marketing they consider valuable. Specifically,
1. What are the media habits of “cultural creatives”?
2. How do they understand the role of their values in their media habits?
3. What challenges would they expect marketers to have in reaching them?
4. What forms of marketing are consistent with their values?

The second phase of this study involves structured interviews with ten “cultural creatives.” Potential informants are being approached outside stores where organic foods are sold, and screened using Ray’s criteria. Demographic diversity is being sought for a theoretical purposive sample with maximum variation. Each interview begins with a written media habits questionnaire, addressing each media type, including new forms such as podcasting and online communities. Each of the four research questions guides a section of the interview, following McCracken (1988). In the final section, informants are asked to imagine a marketing environment consistent with their values and needs as consumers. They are then asked to compare this projected scenario with marketing resources currently available. Analysis is concurrent with data collection.

Preliminary Findings

Completed interviews confirm that these individuals consume media very selectively and that they are skeptical of mainstream media for values-based reasons. The most salient values informing their media consumption decisions relate to the importance they attach to truthfulness, spiritual purity, education, and connections with people around the world. These informants interpret financial incentives and corporate ownership as an inevitable loss of objectivity and credibility in media content. They want uncompromised honesty in reporting, and they believe that while marketers are not usually deliberately or overtly deceptive, accuracy is reduced because “there are motives that are not for the bigger picture.” These interviewees envision ideal media environments in which they can access accurate information easily via light or sound, without being “bombarded,” which is their experience of the current media environment.

Each of these informants spontaneously talked about personal transitions from former mainstream media consumption habits to more selective media habits. These transitions occurred 5-15 years prior to the interviews, and involved discoveries of specific information about media ownership and psychological impacts of mass media. These informants applied their values to this new information to arrive at new meanings of the role of media in their lives and in the world, catalyzing more selective search behaviors. This suggests a developmental process of personal evaluation of media use driven by the application of personal values to new information received about the media and its impacts. Parallel developmental processes may operate in other contexts where consumers apply personal values to new information received.

References

Look Who’s Talking!
Technology-Supported Impression Formation in Virtual Communities
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The growing availability of consumer-generated information on the Internet about products, services, and companies has increased market transparency. Power is shifting from producers to consumers who share their knowledge, experiences, and opinions via virtual communities, electronic discussion forums, online opinion platforms, chat rooms, and weblogs. However, this abundance of readily available information also comes at a cost. How do you distinguish an expert from a fraud? Who is credible and trustworthy, and who isn’t? We form impressions of others based on cues such as age, gender, manner of dress and speech (e.g., Hamilton & Huffman 1971). But how do we construct and evaluate impressions in an online environment that lacks social cues normally present in face-to-face settings?

Cyberspace is in many ways distinctly different from the physical world. Two characteristics stand out. Firstly, interaction takes place through a technological interface, i.e., a computer, mobile phone, or an interactive television with Internet access. This means that the primary relationship is not between the sender and the receiver of information, but rather with the technology-mediated environment (Hoffman & Novak 1996). The second defining characteristic of cyberspace is its textuality. Communication and interaction online is based on the written word, audio, images, icons, and hyperlinks to other Web sites. This allows for new ways of self-presentation in which the physical self does not necessarily have to coincide with the digital self (Schau & Gilly 2003).

Schau and Gilly (2003) have demonstrated that consumers make active use of signs, symbols, material objects, and places to construct a digital self on their personal Web site. In this paper, we want to extend their research into online self-presentational strategies by looking more closely at the receivers’ side. The objective of our research is to investigate how consumers form impressions of senders in the context