Delivering Differentiated Experiential Branding in Web Environments

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Brand positioning strategies anchored in the delivery of pleasurable experiences have become ubiquitous and web communications are privileged vehicles to convey such positioning. One hundred websites with differentiated experiential strategy (sensorial, emotional, social and intellectual) were each observed on 24 visits by consumers who reported intensity of pleasurable experience, satisfaction and revisit intent. Media Metrix traffic and search pattern data was obtained. Structural analyses conducted at the visit level revealed distinct contributions of the different pleasures to satisfaction and revisit intent, with moderating effects of experiential branding strategies. TOBIT website-level analyses highlighted the importance of intellectual pleasure (more so than site functionality) in accounting for traffic and search patterns.

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Recent empirical evidence revealed that, beyond the hedonic/utilitarian distinction, a more differentiated representation of pleasure or positive affects or attitudes provides additional marketing insights (Dubé, Cervellon and Jingyuan 2003; Dubé and LeBel 2003). For instances, Dubé and LeBel showed that laypeople’s conception of pleasure is best captured by four differentiated pleasures: sensory/physical, emotional/aesthetic, social, and intellectual/accomplishment. Brand positioning strategies anchored in the delivery of differentiated pleasurable experiences have become ubiquitous and web communications are privileged vehicles to convey such positioning.

The present study focuses on consumers’ on-line experiences with products and/or services websites positioned along Dubé and LeBel’s four pleasure types. The objectives are: 1) to examine to what extent the intensity of the four types of pleasures is predictive of consumer responses at the individual level, as measured by website satisfaction and revisit intent, and 2) to examine to what extent the success of a website in inducing each of the four types of pleasures is predictive of market response at the brand level, as measured by patronage patterns reported by Media Metrix. We expect that the experiential positioning of the brand moderates the pleasure-intensity and consumer (vs. market) response relationship.

At the individual level, 100 websites with differentiated experiential branding strategy (sensorial, emotional, social and intellectual) were each observed on 24 visits by a panel of 200 participants. Websites were pretested so that each experiential branding strategy (sensory, social, emotional/aesthetic, intellectual) was represented. Each participant browsed a different website for 12 days and after browsing each website visit reported on the intensity of their experience of differentiated pleasures (twelve items, 7-point scale), website functionality (5 items, ?=.87), satisfaction (4 items, ?=.81) and revisit intent (a single likelihood item). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) performed on the 12 differentiated pleasure items revealed that a three-factor structure best represented the differentiated pleasures experience during the browsing episodes: sensory/emotional, social, intellectual. These results imply that sensory and emotional pleasures might have even fuzzier boundaries than expected, which may be due in part to the fact that Internet browsing is dominated by the more abstract senses of sight and sound (Howes, 1991). The correlations over the three types of online experiential pleasures are: -0.68 (for sensory/emotional-social), 0.49 (for sensory/emotional-intellectual) and -0.57 (for social-intellectual).

Structural analyses conducted at the visit level revealed a distinct contribution of the different pleasures to satisfaction and revisit intent, with a moderating effect for the website’s experiential branding strategies. Specifically, the results revealed that sensory/emotional pleasure accounts for the largest main effect on satisfaction (standard coefficient equals to 0.589, with p-value <0.01) over the four types of website. Further, the results demonstrated that website functionality contributes to browsing satisfaction (standard coefficient equals to 0.421, with p-value <0.01) and website browsing satisfaction in turn has a positive and strong impact on revisit intentions (standard coefficient equals to 0.862, with p-value <0.01).

Results revealed that social pleasure has overall a negative impact on website satisfaction, and the effect is further moderated by the type of experiential positioning espoused by a website. Specifically, social pleasure experience while browsing has a significant negative effect on website browsing satisfaction, except for websites with a sensory pleasure positioning strategy (standard coefficients of -0.321 for social websites, -0.228 for emotional websites and –0.308 for intellectual websites). Further, intellectual pleasure has a mild positive impact on website satisfaction and the effect is further moderated by branding positioning as well. Specifically, intellectual pleasure had...
no significant influence on website satisfaction when visitors were browsing websites with sensory and emotional pleasure branding strategy, while significant effects were detected for websites with social and intellectual pleasure branding strategy, with standard coefficients equal to 0.296 and 0.211 respectively.

At the website level, we tested websites’ effectiveness in conveying the brand’s experiential positioning. To this end, Media Metrix data on traffic and information search patterns were obtained for the period extending from March to August 2003. The number of unique visitors served as a proxy for site traffic performance at the aggregate market response level. Further, based on Moe and Fader (2004) we also used indicators of visit depth and breadth such as average pages per usage day, average minutes per page, average usage days per visitor and average minutes per visitors.

Due to the censored nature of Media Metrix data, the standard Tobit Maximum likelihood estimation was adopted to explore the relationship between experiential pleasures aggregated as website level and website effectiveness. TOBIT analyses performed at the site level highlighted the central role of intellectual pleasure, more so that the site functionality, in accounting for traffic and search pattern. Sensory/emotional pleasure and social pleasure didn’t demonstrate any significant predictive power on website-level response indicators, yet the coefficients are negative and large. Further tests revealed that intellectual pleasure has the highest predictive power on website effectiveness for sensory website, and second for social website.

In this study, we attempted to trace and document the linkages between the differentiated pleasures that a brand may be attempting to convey, consumers’ responses when visiting websites for these brands, and aggregate market level responses. Overall, our research provides exploratory insights to better understand and estimate these linkages. It is clear that when using differentiated experiential branding strategies in the web environment, different types of pleasures have different influences on consumers’ responses. This suggests that brand managers and web designers should use extra care in planning their positioning and communication strategies.

Selected References:

Watchdogs on the Internet—Protecting Consumers against Online Fraud
L. Simpson, University of Otago

Counterfeiting is one of the biggest growth industries in the world and factors such as increased profit margins, tax free incomes and low overheads, when combined with the relative ‘safety’ from prosecution that the internet provides, has contributed to the explosion of ‘fake’ good that consumers are offered through mediums such as E-Bay and other on-line auction sites (Alcok, Chen, Ch’ng, Hodson et al 2003). In the past it was generally accepted that consumers knowingly purchased these items as counterfeit, and were prepared to trade off inferior quality goods for the satisfaction of owning a luxury product they might not have been otherwise able to afford. The rise of the ‘super counterfeit’ however, has meant that consumers are often paying large amounts of money for products they believe are genuine (Nia and Zaichkowsky 2000). The sale of branded goods identical in nature to legitimate articles is contrived to purposely deceive naıve consumers (Ang, Cheng, Lim and Tambayah 2001) as well as capture a segment of the consumer market who are willing collaborators in the trade (Tom, Garibaldi, Zeng and Pilcher 1998).

A number of studies in recent years have examined the ability of consumers to differentiate between ‘fake’ and genuine luxury products (e.g. Ang, Cheng, Lim and Tambayah 2001), consumer demand for such products (e.g. Prendergast, Chuen and Phatui 2002; Tom, Garibaldi, Zeng and Pilcher 1998), the value of these goods and consumer purchase intentions towards them (e.g. Cordell, Kieschnick and Wongtada 1996; Nia and Zaichkowsky 2000) as well as means of preventing counterfeiting at the manufacturing end (e.g. Alcok; Chen, Ch’ng, Hodson et al 2003). However, studies of this type do little to actually aid those consumers who are not willing participants in the trade of counterfeit goods—those who genuinely believe they are purchasing legitimate luxury goods.

Counterfeit products on the internet are somewhat of a hidden menace (Field 2005), particularly when they are positioned as genuine, and often sold through a team of sellers to avoid detection of large scale operations. Organisations such as the Anti-Counterfeiting Group (ACG) are useful in identifying and prosecuting large-scale offenders, however, this does not always help the individual consumer looking to buy a designer good at slightly less than retail. Firms such as Tiffany’s have launched legal action against E-Bay as a response to the high numbers of counterfeit products sold through this medium, however Rolex’s failure to successfully sue E-Bay’s German site reaises questions regarding the success of any such lawsuit (Passariello 2004). Individual countries’ (such as France’s) tightening on the import of Asian-made replica products and the like has spurred the growth of sales of this type on the internet, as it becomes the most “easy way for a counterfeiter to get the product out to an end customer” (David Margolis, cited in Passariello 2004). Most luxury goods companies employ individuals to monitor their products on the net, but these companies are more concerned with large scale fraud than the individual seller with one or two items on offer. In addition, programs such as VeRO (E-Bay’s Verified Rights Owner program), which shift the burden of monitoring sales to the brand holder in return for an agreement to remove all infringing items at the brand’s request, have not been successful, as the debate as to whose job it is to prevent sales of these items remains unresolved and most luxury goods brand (including Tiffany’s and LVMH) have refused to join the program.

Given that the law is still somewhat behind in effectively policing trade of this type on the internet, some consumers, frustrated by stories of friends and acquaintances bad experiences of purchasing faux luxury goods, have set themselves up as self-styled ‘consumer