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An Influential Minority: Reaching the New Values-Based Consumers

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This study investigates the media habits of a group estimated as one-quarter of American consumers based on a scale of non-mainstream values, such as environmental protection, spirituality, global interconnectedness, and limited corporate power (Ray & Anderson, 2000). Interviews indicate that these individuals consume media very selectively and that they are skeptical of mainstream media for values-based reasons. Preliminary findings suggest 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 processes may operate in other contexts where consumers apply values to new information.

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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 *value* refers 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.

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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

of word-of-web recommendations within virtual consumer communities (Kozinets 2002). Specifically, we focus on the role of the technological interface. According to Foucault (1977), technology can be considered as a disciplinary mechanism that is embedded in power devices. Examining how technologies are used to form and manage digital impressions, may help us to understand how individuals influence each other online. Gaining systematic insight in this process is necessary for improving and developing tools that aim to aid consumers in their assessment of online contributions (e.g., reputation systems, member profiles, contribution accounts).

Method

The virtual community that serves as our focal research site is broadly organized around health issues. Its topics of interest include health, medication, pregnancy, nutrition, beauty, psychology, and sexuality. The community has been developed by a French independent company that exploits it by means of advertising. The community generates a total of 60,000 new postings per day (posted by French-speaking users worldwide) in its many discussion forums, chat rooms, and weblogs.

Our exploratory inquiry consisted of 3 semi-structured interviews; with the CEO, a moderator, and a back office technician. These interviews have given us insight in how the technological interface is constructed, managed, and used to exert control over member profiles and contributions by the administrators. Furthermore, we have conducted two online focus groups and follow-ups with animators (total of 18 informants). Animators are members selected by the administrators to serve as volunteer moderators. They play an important role in the day-to-day problem detecting and solving related to member behavior. Their extensive knowledge of community dynamics due to their double role as members and moderators has proven a valuable source of information. Combined with detailed observations and content analyses of the virtual community under study, this first round of data collection has given us a deep understanding of the process of technology-supported impression formation in virtual communities.

Next, we will systematically examine technology-supported impression formation in the context of word-of-web recommendations. Which signals are consulted and how are they interpreted? Does the impression formation strategy differ between member types (e.g., long-time versus short-time members, posters versus lurkers). Does it differ with the decision process at stake? We intend to collect data by means of an online survey among the members of the community under study.

Preliminary findings

Based on our first round of data collection, we can draw some preliminary conclusions of the interplay between technology and impression formation.

Technology *uniforms* impression formation. All members have the same tools at their disposal that serve as common references to form impressions on others; e.g., username, avatar, signature, personal web page with photo's and hyperlinks, administrator-controlled member type label, orthography, emoticons.

Technology *speeds up* impression formation and makes it *more reliable*. Members have continuous and exhaustive access to all contributions of any member. Members' past on the community is transparent.

Impression formation technology are *self-nurturing*. Members share tips to master the technology and they develop new tools, e.g., introducing group labels aimed at impression management.

Technology *destabilizes* impression formation. Technology enables members to have multiple identities, while it simultaneously serves as an identifier by means of, for example, orthographic style or IP address. Members who build multiple identities that are too different risk to loose their reputation. Similarly, if technology shows that formed impressions do not correspond with reality, for example by exposing markers of true identity, the backlash may be severe and technology is used as a release tool to express extreme 'corrected' impressions.

It is clear that the administrators play an important role in the *dynamics* of the impression formation process. They interfere by creating status, e.g., by introducing member type labels based on the number of contributions (regular, loyal, bronze, silver, and gold member), and by appointing members to be forum animators. Understanding the differential effects of the various technologies (member-controlled, administrator-controlled, administrator-bounded) on impression formation will aid both managers and consumers in optimizing the power of virtual communities as credible, trustworthy, and expert information sources. Our final aim is to contribute to this goal.

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When A Good Impression Goes Bad: The Effect of Goal Changes on Repeated Attitudes Enquires

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Extended Abstract

Past consumer research has shown consumption goals impact product information processing, weighting and retrieving, which results in variances in the reported attitudes (Huffman and Houston 1993; Markman and Brendle 2000). However, the extant research has only examined how goals impact an initial attitude (Garbarino and Johnson 2001; Huffman and Houston 1993). In reality, a consumer's goal can change from time to time. It remains unclear whether attitudes formed under different consumption goals impact each other. For instance, when consumptions goals change, will the prior goal-driven evaluation influence the later evaluation? If yes, why and in which direction (i.e., assimilating or contrasting)?

We answered the above two questions by relying on Selective Accessibility Model (SAM, Mussweiler 2003) proposed in social judgment literature. The model suggests that whether the evaluation target is judged as similar or dissimilar to the comparison standard will decide whether the contrast or assimilation effect will be resulted. If the target is judged as similar, the assimilation effect will be observed, but if the target is judged as dissimilar to the comparison standard, the contrasting effect will happen. Based on SAM, we argue that an initial positive (bad) attitude formed under a certain consumption goal can be used as a comparison standard, makes the later evaluation of the same object under a conflicting goal worse (better) off.

The current paper suggests that consumers use the relationship between consumption goals as a way to judge similarity or dissimilarity between the current and prior evaluations, (not only judging the applicability of the stored attitudes as suggested in extant attitude literature). Such judgment can be made quite quickly and colors the new evaluating process. In particular, we predict when two conflicting consumption goals activated at different times, attitudes reported under the later consumption goal would be judged as dissimilar to the initial attitudes formed under the earlier consumption goal, resulting in contrast effect. Our prediction was supported with two lab experiments.

Experiment 1 was a 2 (Consumption goal: Best driving experiment vs. economy to drive) by 2 (Timing of the attitude: First time Initial attitude vs. Second time later Attitude) mixed-design experiment. All participants were asked to learn the information of a luxury car (faked brand) and reported their attitudes towards under one consumption goal (i.e., initial attitude), and after a 10-min filler task, they were asked to read information again, and reported their attitude under a different consumption goal (i.e., later attitude). We found that when evaluation was made under economy goal, the later attitude was poorer than the initial attitude; but when evaluation was made under performance goal, the later attitude was better than the initial attitude. A clear pattern of contrast effect between evaluations under conflicting consumption goals were demonstrated in Experiment 1.

In Experiment 2, we demonstrated that the contrast effect was more robust when the cognitive resource was limited. In this one factor (cognitive load: high-rehearsing 7 digits vs. low-rehearsing 2 digits) design experiment, all participants first reported their initial attitudes under performance goal (the same car information as in Experiment 1 was used), and after a filler task were asked to reported their attitudes under economy goal (i.e., later attitude). Cognitive load was manipulated before the second time evaluation. Results revealed that though the initial attitudes reported under performance goal remained same, compared to participants under low cognitive load, those under high cognitive load evaluated the car less positively under economy goal. Our results in experiment 2 suggested that the comparison to the initial attitudes happened as a default, which was consistent with SAM.

Taken together, the current research suggests that when contextual cues (in this research, consumption goals) are salient, consumers can depend on the relationship between those cues to come up with an initial judgment and adjust from there. More specifically, when contextual cues are in conflict, the prior evaluation can serve a comparison standard rather than an anchoring point, resulting in a contrast effect that impacts attitudes reported later.

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Understanding Consumers' Perceptions of Fashion

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Extended Abstract

Despite the prevalence of fashion in the consumer market, previous research on fashion has primarily focused on the characteristics, motivations and behaviors of fashion innovators/leaders (e.g., Cassill and Drake, 1987; Goldsmith Flynn and More, 1996; Goldsmith, Moore and Beaudoin, 1999). Therefore little is known about the meanings of fashion to the broader range of consumers and their perceptions of fashion. This research attempts to fill this void.