



The moderating effect of gender on academic website impression



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 29 March 2014

Keywords:

Moderating effect

Gender

Academic website

Website characteristics

ABSTRACT

This study examines the moderating effect of gender differences on the relationship between website characteristics and the overall impression of two academic websites. Findings provide evidence that website quality characteristics of the website are more important to men and the website navigation characteristics are more important to women. Implications about building websites are relevant to both practitioners and academicians.

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1. Introduction

For a large part of the US population, websites have become a fixture of everyday life that is frequently targeted by business advertising (Choi & Rifon, 2002; Moustakis, Tsironis, & Litos, 2006). With the goal of attracting customers, many advertisers expend considerable effort and resources on understanding both the theoretical and practical approaches for making their websites effective and pleasing to consumers. (Sun, Lim, Jiang, Peng, & Chen, 2010). In fact, research indicates that customers almost always form impressions about a firm based on their experiences with the firm's website (Winter, Saunders, & Hart, 2003; Zhang, Keeling, & Pavur, 2000), rather than on characteristics of the firm itself (Hoffman, Kalsbeek, & Novak, 1996). Businesses justifiably exploit this insight to influence the impressions of stakeholders and customers through the design of their websites (Winter et al., 2003).

As with businesses, colleges and universities wish to profit from the website medium by attracting potential students (Ramakrishnan, Hossain, & Prybutok, 2011). Research shows that academic institutions leverage the presentation, navigation, and quality characteristics of their websites to convey a positive impression to prospective students (Ramakrishnan et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2000). Recognizing that US university student enrollments include near-equal proportions of males and females, the gender effects of websites would appear to be an important research area in

academic e-commerce (Hwang, 2010). Unfortunately, little research is devoted to how gender changes the perception of websites. Because academic institutions use websites for advertising, recruitment, and retention tools, this research seeks to investigate the role of gender in formulating impressions of websites in the university setting.

Marketers and advertisers consider gender a basic strategic factor for market segmentation (Sun et al., 2010), where research indicates gender effects differ in such areas as behavior, biology, cognition, and social orientation (Hofstede, 1988; Sun et al., 2010). Such distinctions suggest that when faced with identical website stimuli, females and males perceive and respond differently (Sun et al., 2010). Therefore, the overall impression of a website's characteristics, such as its presentation, navigation, and quality likely is moderated by gender. The paucity of studies that investigate the influence of gender differences on the impression management of websites, especially within the educational sector, motivate this research to investigate the moderating effect of gender on website impression. Specifically, this work examines the effect of gender on the relationship between the different academic website characteristics and their influence on impressions.

2. Research model and hypotheses

This research develops and validates the model presented in Fig. 1, which draws upon impression management research (Winter et al., 2003) and website characteristics research (Zhang et al., 2000). Impression management deals with notions formed about an organization while using its website (Winter et al., 2003), whereas website characteristics center on the critical features of the website design (Zhang et al., 2000). A major focus

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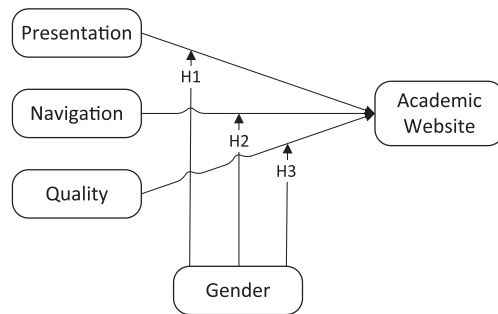


Fig. 1. Research model for the moderating effect of gender on website impression.

of this study is the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between the different website characteristics and the overall impression formed about the website.

2.1. Moderating effect of gender on the relationship between presentation and academic website impression

The presentation characteristic of a website refers to the look and feel of the website (Moustakis et al., 2006). Presentation also includes the utility and the usefulness of the content posted on the website (Moustakis et al., 2006; Ramakrishnan et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2000). A website that exhibits good presentation characteristics should be useful, interesting, aesthetically appealing, and entice visitors to navigate deeper into the website (Huizingh, 2000; Ramakrishnan et al., 2011). Good presentation also depends on avoiding distractions, using graphics and color properly, and locating and organizing information suitably on the web page (Ramakrishnan et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2000).

While both men and women respond to good presentation, they are motivated by such presentation differently. Research shows that men are typically motivated by extrinsic motivators, such as task fulfillment (Hofstede, 1988; Hwang, 2010; Sun et al., 2010), as opposed to women who are usually motivated by intrinsic motivators, such as expressive value and intuitive judgment (Sun et al., 2010). Differences extend to other areas, where Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, and Davis (2003) posit that perception of usefulness is more salient in men than women. In the context of webpage usage, men who perceive the webpage as not useful tend to exhibit more annoyance than women who share the same perceptions. Moreover, if webpage reading or browsing activity hinders men due to perceived inappropriateness of graphics or other distractions, such as webpage ads, men typically become more frustrated than women who experience identical stimuli (Sun et al., 2010). Consistent with research showing that men are more sensitive than women are to the presentation characteristics of the webpage, we posit it is more important to men than to women that the webpage demonstrates an appropriate look and feel. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1. Gender will moderate the impression of academic website presentation, so that the gender effect will be stronger in men than in women.

2.2. Moderating effect of gender on the relationship between navigation and academic website impression

In this research, navigation characteristic of the website refers to the ease with which an individual can browse from one webpage to another in a website (Ramakrishnan et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2000). A good website navigation structure is characterized by the ease of finding the relevant links, placing links at appropriate locations on the webpage (where users intuitively expect them

to be), and the use of standard icons for routine tasks (such as for logging on and off) (Huizingh, 2000; McClure, Wyman, Beachboard, & Eschenfelder, 1997; Ramakrishnan et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2000).

Prior studies show that women are more influenced by social norms as compared to men (Hwang, 2010; Venkatesh & Morris, 2000). Accordingly, if designers do not use standard graphics or if they do not place the standard link buttons where they should be located, women tend to become more exasperated than men (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Therefore, if women perceive the website navigation to be troublesome, or if they experience difficulty finding the appropriate link buttons, then they become more frustrated than men. Consistent with research showing that women are more sensitive than men to the appropriate graphics and placement of navigation buttons, we posit it is more important to women than to men that the webpage demonstrates appropriate navigation characteristics. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2. Gender will moderate the impression of academic website navigation, so that the gender effect will be stronger in women than in men.

2.3. Moderating effect of gender on the relationship between quality and academic website impression

Previous researchers have defined quality a variety of ways, making the definition of webpage quality a challenge (December & Ginsburg, 1995; Reeves & Bednar, 1994). This research defines quality in terms of the quality of information presented in the academic webpage, such that a quality webpage requires quality information (Ramakrishnan et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2000). A quality webpage contains the most stable, the most accurate, and the highest level of information source possible (McClure et al., 1997). For a webpage to be perceived as high quality, the information presented in the web page should be reliable and error free (Moustakis et al., 2006).

Research indicates that informativeness is a more important characteristic for men than for women (Sun et al., 2010), referring to the degree to which a web page can satisfy the consumers' information needs (Sun et al., 2010). Men are motivated by fulfillment of tasks (Hofstede, 1988), so that men, more than women, require that webpage information come from a reliable source and be error free. Consistent with research showing that men are more sensitive than women are to the quality characteristics of the webpage, we posit it is more important to men than to women that the webpage demonstrates quality characteristics. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H3. Gender will moderate the impression of academic website quality, so that the gender effect will be stronger in men than in women.

3. Methods

This research used a survey methodology to collect data for testing the stated hypotheses.

3.1. Measures

As much as practical, the authors used and contextualized previously validated instruments to measure the constructs. They measured presentation, navigation, and quality of the website using the instrument of Zhang et al. (2000) and developed new questions to measure the academic website impression based on the items used to measure the construct of organizational

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