



The effects of home page design on consumer responses: Moderating role of centrality of visual product aesthetics



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of home page design on consumer responses based on the Hierarchy of Effects model and impression formation theory. The design of the study was a one factor (home page design: image- vs. text-oriented) between-subjects design with two moderators, brand familiarity and the centrality of visual product aesthetics (CVPA). College women ($N = 658$) participated in this online experiment. The findings revealed that: (1) an image-oriented design is more effective in enhancing a home page's visual fluency, and (2) people in both high and low CVPA groups preferred an image-oriented home page to a text-oriented home page.

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1. Introduction

Online advertising spending in the U.S. reached \$32 billion in 2012 with a 23.3% annual growth rate and is projected to reach \$62 billion by 2016 (Go-Gulf, 2012), rapidly outpacing the growth rates of traditional advertising media like print and TV. In today's era of multichannel retailing, the retailer's home page plays a key role in this new advertising medium (Singh & Dalal, 1999). As the main entry point to the website, a home page not only draws consumers into the retailer's website, but also builds a brand image through the stories being communicated on the page (Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek, & Brown, 2006; Schenkman & Jönsson, 2000).

During the last decade, website design has received growing attention from scholars and practitioners. Extant online literature and industry reports provide a wealth of information regarding the creation of effective online product presentations that will lead to positive consumer responses (Blanco, Sarasa, & Sanclemente, 2010; Kim & Lennon, 2008; Yoo & Kim, 2012). On the other hand, little is known about the factors involved in effective home page design. Although home pages do not directly generate sales, they have become an effective advertising medium that attracts customers into the website (Singh & Dalal, 1999), building brand/store images and, most importantly, creating positive impressions that

last. Further research on the design of website home pages is therefore clearly warranted.

Drawing on an advertising theory (the Hierarchy of Effects) and a psychology theory (impression formation), this study aims to (1) identify key design factors that determine the effectiveness of a retailer's home page in creating a positive impression, (2) explain the psychological process by which a home page impacts consumers' behavioral intentions, and (3) examine how individual characteristics moderate the impact of this process. Postulating that visual fluency is a key factor in creating positive impressions of an online store, this study's objectives are to: (1) identify the home page design factors that impact the visual fluency of a home page, (2) investigate the process by which visual fluency influences consumer preference and behavioral intentions, and (3) examine whether individual characteristics such as brand familiarity and centrality of visual product aesthetics (CVPA) moderate the effect of home page design on consumer responses.

Empirical findings from this study are expected to contribute to the emerging literature related to online advertising. Considering the high costs associated with attracting new customers to an online store (Evans, 2008), the findings will provide useful information for retailers seeking to build an effective home page that will bring consumers into their store by creating positive impressions and, ultimately, contributing to building a brand image.

2. Conceptual development

This section describes the study's theoretical framework, which integrates the Hierarchy of Effects (HOE) model (Lavidge & Steiner,

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1961) and impression formation theory (Asch, 1946) to explain the process by which a website home page influences consumer behavior.

2.1. Theoretical framework

According to the HOE model, consumers take three steps to respond to advertising messages: cognition – affect – conation (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). Cognition is defined as “a system of beliefs structured into some kind of semantic network” (Holbrook & Batra, 1987, p. 405), while affect signifies the consumer’s emotion or feelings and conation refers to their behavioral intentions, leading to actual behavior (Barry & Howard, 1990). Depending on the context, the sequence of these three steps in the traditional HOE model may change. For example, for low involvement situations, Krugman (1965) suggested a cognition – conation – affect order, whereas Zajonc and Markus (1982) proposed affect-conation – cognition based on their views of affect primacy. Following the traditional HOE model, the current study posited that home page design as an advertisement influences consumers’ evaluation of the visual fluency (cognition) of a home page, which then has an impact on their preference for a home page (affect) and, ultimately, on their behavioral intentions (conation).

Impression formation theory (Asch, 1946) also provides useful insights into understanding how home page design influences consumer behaviors in online retailing. Consumers form a positive or negative impression about a brand even when they are exposed to only a small piece of information about a brand. This process is referred to as impression formation (Aquirre-Rodriguez, Bosnjak, & Sirgy, 2012). In traditional retailing, consumers form first impressions and observe or infer store-related information from the store’s window displays (Sen, Block, & Chandran, 2002). In online retailing, a website home page is posited to have a similar impact on the way online shoppers form their impressions of an online store. As with window displays in traditional retailing, a home page can communicate information about product offerings, events and promotions, resulting in the creation of certain impressions about a website.

Although home page designs constantly change to reflect new products, seasonal events and/or promotions, three dimensions primarily determine a consumer’s perception of a website; (1) the information available on the site, (2) the usability of the site, and (3) the impression elicited from the site. Of these, the first impression of the website is what draws people in to spend more time on the website (Schenkman & Jönsson, 2000). Lindgaard et al. (2006) found that first impressions of a home page are made instantaneously, within 50 ms, and these quickly formed impressions remain remarkably consistent over time.

Furthermore, there is a so-called ‘halo effect’ of first impressions created by the visual appeal of websites. Psychology research generally supports a long-term effect of first impressions in that people often make judgments based on their positive first impressions (Lindgaard et al., 2006). Additionally, ‘confirmation bias’ corroborates that people tend to seek out confirmatory facts supporting their initial assumption, while ignoring disconfirmatory facts (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Positive impressions of a website were found to improve a consumer’s usability perception despite actual poor usability experiences (Lindgaard & Dudek, 2003). Campbell and Pisterman (1996) suggested that positive impressions from a home page draw attention away from negative issues experienced in subsequent web pages. Thus, it is critical for retailers to design a home page that creates a positive first impression of a brand or store.

Previous research has shown that visual images play an important role in creating a positive impression of the retailer and facilitating positive emotional experiences (Park, Choi, & Kim,

2005; Tractinsky & Lowengart, 2007), which then affect consumers’ subsequent decision making processes (Janiszewski, 1993; Kim & Moon, 1998). Applying the HOE model and impression formation theory to the online retailing setting, this study postulates that a visually fluent home page will create a positive impression of an online store, impacting consumers’ affective response (e.g., preference) and, ultimately, their conative response (e.g., behavioral intentions) with regard to that online store (see Fig. 1). The following section provides a detailed review of the literature supporting the development of the study hypotheses.

2.2. Home Page Design and Consumer Responses

Advertising research largely supports the contention that pictures are more easily recalled and recognized than text in advertisements (Paivio, 2007). Rossiter and Percy (1978) found that image-oriented advertisements had a more positive effect on consumers’ affective learning than text-oriented advertisements. Similarly, Hirschman (1986) found that consumers perceived image-oriented advertisements as being more aesthetic and emotional than text-oriented advertisements and that image-oriented advertisements increased consumers’ perceptions of familiarity.

Compared to traditional media such as newspapers and magazines, websites provide more flexibility and capacity to create and communicate information using pictures and text (Wiebe & Howe, 1998). Currently, some home pages are predominantly image-oriented with dominant visual images and minimal text, whereas others are predominantly text-oriented, containing many text-based navigational links to other pages on the website and minimal image content. The results of a content analysis of the top 50 online retailers’ websites (Internet Retailer, 2011) revealed that more than half the websites analyzed were text-oriented and less than third were image-oriented. However how pictures and text on home pages contribute to the creation of positive impressions remains largely conjectural.

A retail home page is like a store front that people pass by while browsing the Internet. Rather than engaging in high cognitive works, consumers tend to glance over a home page and decide to browse further or go to another website. Based on the way consumers interact with home pages and the extant research, this study posits that the visual fluency of the page plays a critical role in forming an impression and enticing consumers into browsing a website.

2.2.1. Visual fluency

Visual fluency is defined as “the ease with which visual stimuli are processed” (Winkielman, Schwarz, Reber, & Fazendeiro, 2003, p. 77). When exposed to visual stimuli, people perform cognitive work to process the information. The amount of cognitive work

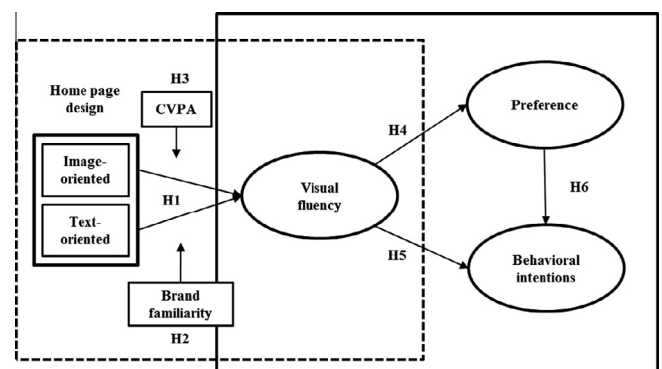


Fig. 1. Proposed model of the study.

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