



## Consumers' cognitive response to website change

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### ABSTRACT

The issue of understanding consumers' responses to different levels and types of change in a retail website is beginning to receive increased attention. This study extends research which has been conducted to date by examining the cognitive side of consumer response to change. Specifically, this paper develops and tests an empirical model that explores the role of curiosity, control, performance, utilitarian value and hedonic value as cognitive components of consumer's response to change. The results of an online experiment demonstrate significant cognitive responses from both types of change, with the overall response from task-relevant change demonstrating negative impacts, and non-task-relevant change demonstrating positive impacts. In addition, a number of mediated paths are identified.

### 1. Introduction

For most retailers, implementing change in retail websites is an inevitability. Competitive, social and technological pressures require retailers to adapt their approaches to interacting with customers, and in some instances require retailers to adopt entirely new ways of interacting with customers (Ainsworth and Ballantine, 2014). Consequently, while website change may occur on an ongoing and piecemeal basis as new technologies and responses to competitive or social changes are implemented, it may also be necessary to completely relaunch a retail website due to radical or revolutionary change.

Given the importance of the website to the marketing exchange (e.g. Eroglu et al., 2001; Keeling et al., 2010), understanding how such changes impact consumers is an important area of retail research. To date, the work of Ainsworth and Ballantine (2014) provides our best understanding of consumers' responses to website change. However, while their study was the first to explore consumer response to holistic site-level change, the study itself focused solely on emotional responses to change, leaving the cognitive mechanisms largely unknown. The aim of this study is to understand consumers' cognitive responses to retail website change. To achieve this aim an empirical model focusing on cognitive responses to change is developed and tested. Within that, two types of change are evaluated – task relevant and non-task-relevant change.

### 2. Background literature

#### 2.1. Importance of the retail website

While all retail environments are central to the success of a retailer (Kotler, 1973), as multi- and omni-channel retailing grows, the retail website has become an essential platform for customer engagement. Although all websites are constructed of the same underlying technology (Demangeot and Broderick, 2007), retail websites (unlike wikis or search engines) can be conceptualised, through telepresence (Steuer, 1992), as interactive virtual exchange environments (Demangeot and Broderick, 2010; Rosen and Purinton, 2004; Williams and Dargel, 2004). Like their offline counterparts, these online environments have been shown to be an important source of cues which influence both evaluations and behaviour while online (e.g. Keeling et al., 2010; Roy et al., 2001) at both the general (Demangeot and Broderick, 2010; Eroglu et al., 2003) and specific (Fiore and Jin, 2003; Wang et al., 2007) levels. Consequently, changes to a retailer's website are expected to elicit important consumer responses towards that website.

#### 2.2. Responses to change

As a verb, *to change* refers to the process of creating difference, yet as a noun *the change* refers to the object resulting from the difference creation process. The distinction between change as a process and change as an outcome has been discussed in the psychology literature. For example, Rensink (2002, p. 248) defines change as “the transformation, over time, of a well-defined, enduring structure”, and distin-

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guishes the observation of change in progress from the observation of something that has changed, terming the two dynamic and completed change, respectively. For most marketing contexts (including retail website change), consumers are exposed to completed change, and as such, completed change is the focus of this study.

Research on change within marketing is limited, with only a handful of studies focused on change, and most focusing on static stimuli such as advertising (e.g. Schumann et al., 1990; Shapiro and Nielsen, 2013), branding (e.g. Nordstrom and Swan, 1976), and price (e.g. Mazumdar and Jun, 1993). While limited, these studies demonstrate that change can be used as a strategic marketing tool for evoking customer responses. For instance, Shapiro and Nielsen (2013) demonstrate positive effects on brand recall from subtle changes to the position of logos within an advertisement. Similarly, Schumann et al. (1990) demonstrate that changes to the cosmetic or substantive aspects of a message affect the persuasiveness of advertisements.

Beyond static stimuli, only Ainsworth and Ballantine (2014) and Brügger et al. (2011) focus on changes in more interactive stimuli. Brügger et al. (2011) examine the effect of cosmetic changes to the physical stores of a fast-food chain. However, the focus of their study is primarily on the long-term effects on retail performance, and despite including consumer measures, these are utilised as measures of retail performance (e.g. increased word-of-mouth, increased value for the retailer). Ainsworth and Ballantine (2014) develop and test a model that examines how varying degrees of change affects consumers' emotional reactions when experiencing a changed website for the first time. In their model, Ainsworth and Ballantine include two types of change and their effects on the emotional dimensions of Pleasure, Arousal and Dominance. To examine this change, Ainsworth and Ballantine (2014) presented a two-factor model for website change, that reflected the degree of noticeable difference created by the modification, addition or the removal of elements within two mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive typological dimensions, which were based on the typology literature (e.g. Eroglu et al., 2001; Zhang and von Dran, 2000). The authors termed these two change factors task-relevant change and non-task-relevant change. In the present study, the two-factor change model is similarly adopted, where task-relevant change is defined as the noticeable differences in the attributes of the online environment that influence or have the potential to influence how a user interacts with the website to achieve shopping or task related goals, while non-task-relevant change is defined as the noticeable differences in the attributes of the online environment that are relatively inconsequential to the attainment of shopping or task related goals.

Task-relevant change represents change that carries a high level of task-relevancy as it involves change among the attributes related to core processes and information (Eroglu et al., 2001; Hausman and Siekpe, 2009; Zhang and von Dran, 2000). Change in this dimension can be characterised by an interruption to the normal processes and procedures a consumer is required to evoke while interacting with the online environment and includes, for example, modifications to layout, navigation bars, check-out procedures and the like. Conversely, non-task-relevant change is the noticeable differences in the attributes of the online environment that are relatively inconsequential to the attainment of shopping or task related goals. This dimension represents change that carries little or no task-relevancy as it involves change among the attributes related to auxiliary information, aesthetic properties or non-core processes (Eroglu et al., 2001; Hausman and Siekpe, 2009; Zhang and von Dran, 2000). Moreover, change in this dimension will not interrupt the normal processes or procedures a consumer is required to evoke while interacting with the online environment, but will differ to information stored in memory and conflicts with the expected environment. These changes typically include, for example, modifications to background, non-interactive imagery, fonts, white-space and the like.

### 2.3. Cognitive response to website change

Alongside emotional response, individuals also experience a cognitive response to stimuli, which can influence behaviour (Bitner, 1992; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1982; Sweeney and Wyber, 2002; Williams and Dargel, 2004). For example, Kim et al. (2007) found that online store perceptions mediated the relationship between image interactivity and patronage intentions in an online retail store. Similarly, Chang and Chen (2008) found that risk was a significant mediator in the relationship between environmental cues and purchase intentions within an online retail store.

With respect to holistic environments, such as websites, cognitive appraisal theory (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1982) can be applied to understand how cognitive evaluations of an environment affect behaviours toward that environment. Specifically, Kaplan and Kaplan (1982) suggest that the environment, acting as a stimulus, engenders behaviour based on rational needs to understand and categorise. Based on Kaplan and Kaplan's (1982) study, environments which provide a desired level of exploration potential (i.e. those which elicit curiosity, richness, involvement, information), yet are perceived to also provide the ability to understand (i.e. the ability to comprehend, maintain one's bearings, and understand what is going on in the environment) are positively appraised. Consequently, in the present study, curiosity and control are identified as central cognitive response variables for examining the consumers' cognitive response to a changed website.

In addition to control and curiosity, various research has noted the importance of consumers' perceptions of value for consumption (Babin et al., 1994; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986), and in particular, retail success (Diep and Sweeney, 2008). Overall, research supports the view that the creation of value leads to positive outcomes for retailers. For instance, shopping value has been shown to have positive effects on patronage intention (Jones et al., 2006; Stoel et al., 2004) as well as customer satisfaction (Babin et al., 2005), and loyalty and word-of-mouth behaviour (Jones et al., 2006). In light of these findings, understanding how value attributions are derived in the face of change seems pertinent for managers and academics alike.

Within the extant value literature, two types of value can be readily identified: hedonic value and utilitarian value. Hedonic value is derived from purchase- or experience-related emotions felt during the shopping trip (Stoel et al., 2004). In this way, hedonic value reflects the value received from the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of the shopping experience (Jones et al., 2006). Complimentarily, utilitarian value is derived from the more task-oriented, cognitive, and non-emotional outcomes of shopping (Babin et al., 1994). Consequently, utilitarian value represents the benefits felt from accomplishing specific tasks or goals while shopping (Stoel et al., 2004). In this way, utilitarian value is a perceived gain from an experience that is derived from obtaining satisfactory task-related outcomes – such as purchase or information acquisition (Babin et al., 1994). While hedonic value and utilitarian value do influence retail outcomes differently, value on the whole increases most retail outcomes such as word-of-mouth, satisfaction, re-patronage intentions, and loyalty (Jones et al., 2006).

Given technology has an important role in influencing shopping behaviour (e.g. Childers et al., 2001), in web-based environments, the assessment of value for an online retail environment should take into consideration the shopping technology as part of the shopping experience. In particular, the perception of website performance (in terms of shopping process) should be included alongside hedonic and utilitarian value in the assessment of the value of a shopping trip. While technology performance is a key component of technology acceptance (Lee and Lehto, 2013; Venkatesh and Davis, 2000), within the marketing literature, process-based performance is often embedded within descriptions of utilitarian value (e.g. Jones et al., 2006). However, such efficiencies are not *necessary* for attributions of utilitarian value to form, although they likely enhance them (e.g. Babin et al., 1994). Such research implies that *process* performance is a likely, but non-essential

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