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Perceived message consistency: Explicating how brand messages being processed across multiple online media

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ABSTRACT

People tend to search product information from various online media. Although high perceived message consistency is crucial to a brand's success, how multiple online brand messages being processed and how can it be measured have not been elucidated and tested. This study initiates an attempt to articulate the mechanism underlying perceived message consistency across multiple online media and to develop a scale using a rigid scale development procedure. Three survey studies have been conducted. The findings demonstrated that perceived message consistency results from the relevancy and expectancy evaluations. Relevancy and expectancy evaluations are either positively or negatively correlated in the high-relevancy situation and not correlated in the low-relevancy situation. In addition, the eight scale items developed by this study have been demonstrated to be valid and reliable to measure perceived message consistency across individuals of different ages (i.e., from 18 to 61), product categories (i.e., bottled water, movie, and notebook), and online media (i.e., YouTube, news site, and review site). The scale items were also demonstrated to be better than existing scales that involve only relevancy evaluation items.

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1. Introduction

People are exposed to multiple brand messages from various online media such as YouTube, news sites, and blogs along their decision journey. Many scholars believe that consistency across brand messages is the necessary antecedent of synergy. Consistency is essential for brand messages to be successfully integrated into individuals' brand memory networks, leading to synergized communication effects such as more positive brand attitude and higher consumer-based brand equity (Duncan, 2005; Keller, 2009). One study that involved 27,000 individuals across 14 industries also found that higher perceived message consistency increases satisfaction by 20 percent and increases revenue by up to 15 percent (Pulido, Stone, & Strevel, 2014). Because high perceived message consistency is crucial to a brand's success, marketers strive to ensure brand messages to be perceived as consistent. Nonetheless, what is perceived message consistency, and how can it be measured?

Conceptually, perceived message consistency involves two aspects: message elements and an evaluation mechanism. In other words, perceived message consistency is the result of consumers'

evaluation of various message elements across multiple brand messages. Previous integrated marketing communication (IMC) studies have suggested that brand messages should be consistent in terms of their strategic and executional elements (Delgado-Ballester, Navarro, & Sicilia, 2012; Kanso, Alan Nelson, & Kitchen, 2015; Lee & Park, 2007; McGrath, 2011; Nowak & Phelps, 1994). What is unclear is how consumers evaluate the strategic and executional elements of multiple brand messages. The evaluation mechanism between multiple brand messages has not received enough attention (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2012). Previous studies have focused on the evaluation mechanism involving only one brand message, such as the visual-verbal consistency of a print advertisement (Heckler & Childers, 1992) and ad-brand consistency (Halkias & Kokkinaki, 2014). The few studies that have focused on multiple brand messages do not elucidate the evaluation mechanisms (McGrath, 2011; Navarro-Bailón, 2012; Navarro, Sicilia, & Delgado-Ballester, 2009). Speed and Thompson (2000) and Gwinner and Eaton (1999), whose scales were adapted in studies relating to the strategic element of message consistency (Navarro et al., 2009; Navarro-Bailón, 2012) also failed to demonstrate a clear theoretical foundation. This study, thus, initiates an attempt to articulate evaluation mechanisms in the context of multiple brand messages on the Web.

In addition, among the nine message consistency scales found,

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four are related to brand managers' perceptions of message consistency (Chen, 2011; Lee & Park, 2007; Low, 2000; Reid, 2005). Although the remaining five scales are related to consumers' perception of message consistency, three of them focus on the strategic element (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2012; Navarro et al., 2009; Navarro-Bailón, 2012) and two of them focus on the executional element (McGrath, 2011; Wang & Nelson, 2006). None of the scales was focused on both elements or was tested through the rigid scale development process. Therefore, this study also aims to develop a scale that manifests the message elements and evaluation mechanisms of consumers' perception of message consistency through a more rigid scale development procedure.

The subsequent sections follow the scale development and analysis procedure of Gerbing and Anderson (1988), Worthington and Whittaker (2006), and DeVellis (2012). According to them, scale development involves three stages: conceptualization, item generation, and scale purification. At the conceptualization stage, this study articulates the message elements and evaluation mechanisms related to perceived message consistency. At the item generation stage, twenty-four initial items were generated from various sources. At the scale purification stage, three studies have been conducted to optimize scale length; examine the factor structure, validities, and reliabilities of the scale; and test the relationship between relevancy and expectancy evaluations.

2. Stage one: conceptualization and theoretical background

2.1. Message elements of perceived message consistency

In the early 1990s, scholars suggested that message consistency involves both strategic and executional elements. Keller (1996) suggests that strategically and executionally consistent brand messages can create an integrated and extensive brand memory network that are strongly associated with a brand's core concept. Duncan (2005) also suggest that consistency at the executional level is only the tip of the iceberg. Consistency should go deeper to the strategic or even the corporate mission level so that consumers can enjoy a consistent brand experience across various touchpoints.

Consistency at the strategic level refers to brand messages communicating brand positioning or similar brand meaning. Nowak and Phelps (1994) and Phelps and Johnson (1996) have suggested that message consistency involves maintaining a clear positioning across all communication tools, such as advertising and publicity. Duncan (2005) also believes that marketers should tailor their messages to various stakeholders while maintaining a single brand positioning, a notion that has been accepted in the recent literature on message consistency (Chen, 2011; Chen & Wong, 2012). Navarro-Bailón (2012) is one of the first to examine consumers' perception of the strategic element of message consistency. Because most consumers do not know brands' positioning, Navarro-Bailón (2012) defines the construct as the existence of a common brand meaning shared among multiple means of communication.

In contrast, consistency at the executional level refers to brand messages that communicate similar verbal, visual, or tonal elements. Nowak and Phelps (1994) and Phelps and Johnson (1996) have used the term "one-voice and one-look" communication to describe message consistency. This concept emphasizes the need for a brand to integrate key verbal and visual foci across all brand messages. Key verbal foci include headlines, slogans, or other verbal elements of brand messages (Heckler & Childers, 1992; Kansa et al., 2015). Key visual foci include characters (e.g., the Jolly Green Giant), settings (e.g., Marlboro's Western imagery), typefaces, logos, colors, and other design elements (Duncan, 2005; McGrath, 2011; Voorveld & Valkenburg, 2015). McGrath (2011) also suggests that

brand messages' overall tone should be consistent at the executional level. Key tonal execution refers to how executional elements are expressed to induce similar subjective feelings (Daignault, Soroka, and Giasson 2013; McGrath, 2011).

Therefore, the current belief about perceived message consistency is that it is necessary to maintain a single brand meaning (i.e., the strategic element) and to share common verbal, visual, and tonal foci (i.e., the executional elements) across different brand messages, thus ensuring that consumers perceive various brand messages as consistent.

2.2. Evaluation mechanisms of perceived message consistency

Heckler and Childers (1992) propose that consumers' perception of the visual-verbal consistency of a print advertisement involves both relevancy and expectancy evaluations. A relevancy evaluation is a process in which consumers evaluate a print advertisement's visual and verbal messages in terms of the degree to which the two message elements contribute to the clear identification of the common communication theme. The two message elements are perceived to be highly relevant if consumers can clearly identify the common communication theme. For example, if the visual message shows a fleet of delivery trucks cruising at high speed and a verbal message says "express," consumers will perceive the visual and verbal elements as highly relevant because they can identify the common communication theme of rapid delivery. In contrast, expectancy evaluation is the process through which consumers evaluate message elements in terms of the degree to which message elements fit existing schema evoked by the common communication theme (Lee & Mason, 1999). The message elements will be perceived as expected if consumers are not surprised, because the presentation of those message elements fit the existing schema of the common communication theme. For a campaign with a common theme of rapid delivery, an expected visual message can be a fleet of delivery trucks cruising at high speed. A unexpected visual message can be a fleet of delivery trucks with bullet-shaped containers cruising at high speed (Lee & Mason, 1999). In other words, Heckler and Childers (1992) believe that consistency evaluation is a two-step process; relevancy evaluation followed by expectancy evaluation. Higher perceived relevancy and expectancy result in higher perceived consistency.

This study takes a step further to extend the two evaluation mechanisms to the context of multiple brand messages on the basis of the exemplar model of classification, schema congruity theory, and norm theory. The exemplar model of classification is used to explain the relevancy evaluation of brand extension consistency (Goh, Chattaraman, and Forsythe, 2013). The exemplar model of classification suggests that a new object is compared against memory representations of the exemplars or brand nodes. Brand nodes that either have high memory strength or are highly relevant to the new object are more likely to be retrieved and therefore to influence the classification decision the most strongly. The new object will then be stored in the memory category with which it shares the greatest overall relevancy (Kruschke, 2011; Nosofsky, 2011). In the same vein, the relevancy evaluation of multiple brand messages involves three steps: (1) retrieve memory nodes of previously exposed brand messages in terms of key brand meaning and verbal/visual/tonal executions that are high in memory strength or relevancy to the new brand message, (2) perform a relevancy evaluation between the new brand message and the retrieved memory nodes, and (3) determine the level of relevancy (see Fig. 1).

In the case of a YouTube commercial film followed by an online publicity situation, a consumer will retrieve a recently viewed YouTube commercial film about Zara from his or her brand memory

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