Telepresence and Aesthetic Experiences on Online Stores:
A Brand-Website Image Congruence Perspective

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Background and Purpose

The seamless integration of traditional and online retailing has been increasingly emphasized as consumers shop through all consumer-facing devices without time and space limits (Sleter, 2018). Despite 95% of marketers and e-commerce professionals agree that a multichannel strategy allows them to better target customers ("Multichannel Digital," 2015), many companies have failed to take an integrated approach across their channels (Savut, 2015), which may influence consumers' perceptions of the company's cross-channel congruence. Further, multichannel integration has often been discussed and studied from operational perspectives (e.g., shared inventory and customer service across channels), with much less attention paid on the symbolic or aesthetic image aspect of channel integration (e.g., whether a brand's online store [or website] design accurately reflects the brand image). To address this gap, this study investigates how consumers' *perceived brand-website fit* (i.e., congruence of a brand's online store to its brand image) influences consumers' patronage intent for the online store by driving consumers' aesthetic and telepresence experiences.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

According to the integration of schema and congruity theory, when individuals face a new event or object, they compare it with existing schemas which are cognitive structures organized in their minds (Mandler, 1982). When the new event or object is congruent with the existing schema, people tend to evaluate it more favorably. In the context of brand extensions, perceived fit refers to the degree of perceived linkage between the image of the parent brand and that of an extension (Smith & Park, 1992). Researchers found that perceived parent brand-extension fit reduces perceived risk and improves the evaluation of the extension (Sandor, 2003). In the e-commerce context, consumers may perceive a fit (or congruence) when a high degree of similarity exists between the image of the brand and that of its online store. Consumers' perceived brand-website fit may help them more positively evaluate the website design as it may enhance the perceptual fluency in processing the website and evoke the attributes and benefits of the brand stored in the consumers' memories. Thus, we predict that perceived brand-website fit positively influences consumers' aesthetic experience with the website (H1), which in turn increases website patronage intent (H2). Telepresence in an ecommerce website refers to the sense of being present which consumers feel as if they would in a physical store and is affected by consumers' perceived vividness of the sensory information (Shih, 1998), which may be aided by a high brand-website fit. Song, Fiore, and Park (2007) found that telepresence positively affected consumers' intent to purchase, which in turn influenced their intent to patronage the website. Thus, we hypothesize that perceived brand-website fit positively influences consumers'

telepresence experience on the website (H3), which in turn leads to website patronage intent (H4). Finally, we predict that the influence of perceived brand-website fit on website patronage intent will be mediated by the aesthetic and telepresence experiences (H5).

Method

Data were collected via an online survey with a national sample of 458 U.S. female consumers (ages 20-50, mean age = 37.4 [SD = 8.17]) representing diverse ethnic, education, income, and occupation groups. Participants first browsed one of six apparel brands' online stores randomly assigned to them to select a top and a bottom that they liked the best. After the browsing activity, participants returned to the survey to enter information on the clothing items they had chosen and completed all measures based on their browsing experience. Measures included perceived brand-website fit (3 items; Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006), telepresence (3 items; Fiore, Kim, & Lee, 2005) and aesthetic experience (4 items; Kwon & Lennon, 2009) of the website, and website patronage intent (7 items: Wang, Baker, Wagner, & Wakefield, 2007).

Results

Confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement model resulted in an acceptable fit (NFI, TLI, CFI > .90; RMSEA = .089) with eviden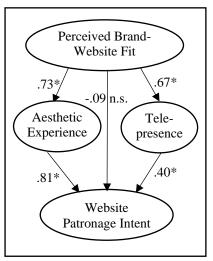ce for convergent and discriminant validity (e.g., factor loadings > .70 for all items, all average variance extracted [AVE] estimates > .65, and AVEs > shared variances for all factors) and reliability (Cronbach's αs > .70) of the measurements. Results from structural equation modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation revealed support for all hypotheses. As shown in Figure 1, the perceived brand-website fit positively influenced both the aesthetic and telepresence experiences, supporting H1 and H3, respectively. Further, these aesthetic and telepresence experiences positively influenced consumers' patronage intent for the brand's website, supporting H2 and H4, respectively. Finally, consumers' brand-website fit perception indirectly influenced their website patronage intent (indirect effect size = .80) through both aesthetic (Sobel's z = 8.54, $p < .001$) and telepresence (Sobel's z = 6.49, $p < .001$) experiences as the mediators, supporting H5.

Figure 1. SEM results. *$p < .001$

Implications

This study demonstrates the importance of seamless channel integration from a symbolic image congruence perspective. Specifically, findings of this study suggest that the ease with which consumers process a brand's website due to the website's high image fit to the brand's original image may increase the consumers' acceptance of the website's aesthetic appeal and help them feel as if they were in the brand's physical store while shopping online, which in turn leads to liking of the website. Further research is needed to disentangle the cross-channel image fit phenomenon and factors that influence the fit perception.

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