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Abstract

This paper investigates the customer's brand experience in the context of online product customization. We posit that on the web, brand image is tied to the brand experience, which includes: (1) the personality characteristics of the website, and (2) the extent to which interactions at the website parallel a playground experience. Two exploratory studies utilizing observations and interviews of online users assessed the validity of our conceptualization. Drawing from research in "social response" (e.g., Reeves & Nass, 1996), we find that customers readily translate website design elements into personality characteristics. We also find that, during online product customization, feelings of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) parallel the elements of good play (Norén-Björn, 1982). Finally, our results suggest that there are notable differences between goal-oriented (hunting) and process-oriented (gathering) users in their conceptualizations of personality and play. The paper concludes with some suggestions for how to design websites to convey the desired brand image.

Keywords: Brand image, brand experience, brand personality, optimal stimulation, product customization, social response, web design

1. Introduction

Websites have become an increasingly popular way for customers to browse for information and purchase products. For example, e-Marketer (<http://www.emarketer.com>) estimates that in the second Quarter of 2002, about 61% of the US population aged 14+ were Internet users, 80% of the Internet users have shopped online, and total annualized business-to-consumer sales on the Internet is \$75 billion and growing rapidly. In addition to providing consumers with information and facilitating commerce, many well-known brands (e.g., Pepsi, IBM) use their web presence to reinforce and build their brand image by attempting to orchestrate specific brand experiences for customers who use their websites. Simply put, brand image is the cluster of attributes and associations related to the brand (e.g., Coke is traditional and refreshing; Toyota is reliable and for everyday people). Much of the current knowledge guiding industry efforts at building web-based brand image is anecdotal - there is little systematic academic knowledge about why or how websites influence brand image. Interestingly, however, there has been considerable research on how people interact with computers and with marketing stimuli (e.g., brands, advertising, store environments). We use the extant research on these topics as the basis for developing our framework and empirical study for understanding and explaining website influence on the formation of brand image.

Two major streams of research and their findings are particularly relevant for our study. First, recent research on “social response” has shown that people’s interactions with computers, television and new media are fundamentally social and natural, just like interactions in real life (Reeves & Nass, 1996; Nass & Moon, 2000). People treat computers as social actors and make social attributions to computers similar to attributions they make about people (e.g., their personalities). We surmise that this is particularly likely with computer-related technologies, such as websites, because they exhibit characteristics that people expect when interacting with other people – language skills, turn-taking, and general ability to respond and interact. Thus it is

likely that *customers will ascribe personality traits to a website*, which in turn, helps define the image of the brand or product promoted at the website.

Second, there is substantial research on “optimal stimulation” that shows that some tasks can become particularly absorbing to customers and transform them into a state of mind characterized by a loss of awareness of time and place. This state of mind, termed “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), has also been shown to occur with web surfers and shoppers (Novak, et al., 2000). Typically, three conditions must be present for the state of “flow” to exist: (1) a clearly defined aim or task, (2) quick and constant feedback, and (3) a continual balance between challenge and ability (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). To provide focus for our study, we studied people’s interactions with websites as they attempted to customize products (e.g., computers, sneakers) online to meet their individual needs - a task in which all three conditions for flow are likely to be present. The self-paced nature of interactions during *online product customization creates a “flow” experience akin to being on a playground*—the customer “plays” with various features and options without the presence of salespeople or spokespersons. In turn, as customers become absorbed in their play at the website, this experience forges images about the brand, both favorable and unfavorable.

We propose that customers’ online brand image is influenced substantially by their perceptions of a website’s personality. Additionally, for websites that engage customers in product customization, we propose that the nature of their “playful” experiences at the website also has substantial impact on brand image. Our propositions are in line with accepted models of brand image formation (Biel, 1992; Herzog, 1963; Keller, 1998). For example, Keller (1998) describes brand image in terms of four aspects of brand associations: (1) types (attributes and benefits), (2) favorability, (3) strength, and (4) uniqueness of brand associations. Website personality is an *attribute*, which we find is multidimensional. The website as a playground is a type of experiential *benefit*. Both website personality and playground experience can vary in

terms of favorability, strength, and uniqueness, and impact brand image. For example, the playground experience can have a differential impact on the strength and uniqueness of brand associations because of the one-to-one, absorbing nature of the brand experience as controlled by the customer. We use two exploratory studies to understand the extent to which customers ascribe personality to a website and view the website as a playground when shopping for customized products. We also explore how these two factors influence brand image formation. Both the nature and extent of these two factors are typically more pronounced in the online medium than in static offline media such as magazines and newspapers, which firms have traditionally used for building their brand image.

In the next section, we describe the observation-and-interview method we used to measure and categorize customer interactions as participants navigated the websites of several well-known brands. In Section 3, we summarize the results and findings from our study, and assess the extent to which our conceptualization of websites as personalities and playgrounds is borne out by our data. We focus primarily on the interpretation of the qualitative data that we collected, supplemented with some summaries of quantitative data. In Section 4, we explicate several robust, non-obvious, and emergent insights from our study – we consider these insights to be the main contributions from our research. In Section 5, we articulate the managerial implications of our results and identify future research opportunities to gain finer-grained understanding of how websites influence brand image.

We start by summarizing the major findings from the study (see Figure 1) to provide a frame of reference for the reader in understanding our method and results. Our results suggest that the experiences people have at a website generalize to the company itself and its products. Many website visitors view the symbolic elements (e.g., fonts, colors, layouts) and the functional elements (e.g., price updates, online customer support, pop up windows) of websites as conveying personality attributes. Based on these personality attributes and their personal

preferences and past experiences, customers perceive websites as possessing particular personality traits such as serious, fun-loving, professional, casual, trustworthy, and dishonest. We find that even seemingly simple design elements of a website, such as font size, might convey specific personality traits (e.g., when a firm uses small fonts in certain situations, customers equate that with dishonesty). This finding is consistent with Topffer's law (Gombrich, 1972), which asserts that we will ascribe a personality even to any squiggle that we interpret as a human face. Thus, in retrospect, it should come as no surprise that customers view interactions with websites as substitutes for their interactions with salespeople in offline media, and as a result, websites have a multidimensional "personality," much like a real-life salesperson or even a friend. We also note differences between task-oriented and process-oriented uses of the website (Novak, et al., 2000) and how the importance of design elements varies depending on the type of usage.

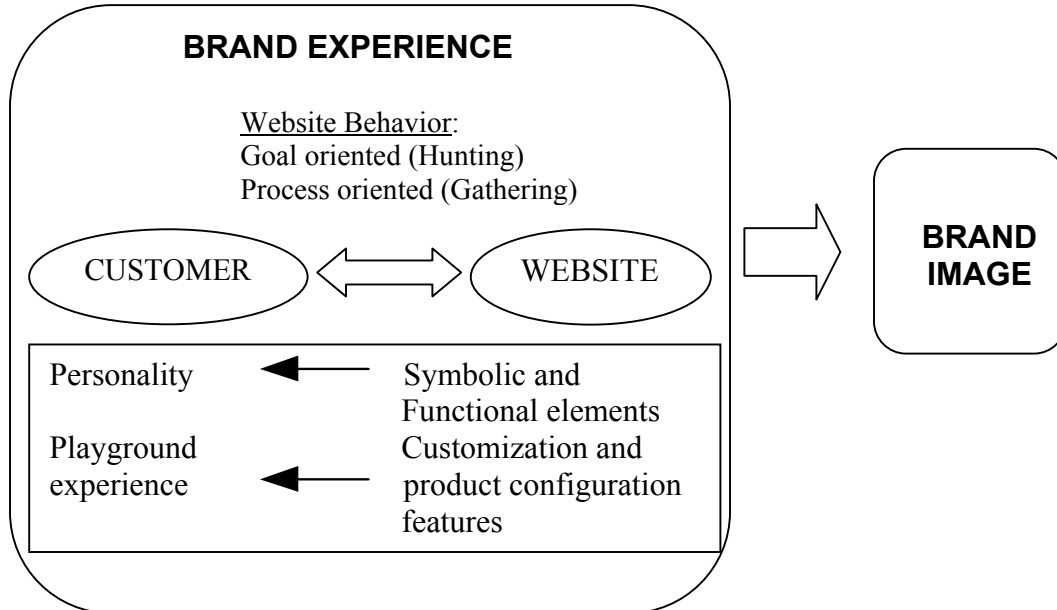


Figure 1: Relationships between Website Personality and Playground and Brand Image

Our results also support the analogy of a website as a playground, although the analogy may not be as strongly perceived as the personality traits. With no purchase pressure (as might be the case when a real-life salesperson is present), the experience of browsing and shopping resembles a playground environment. This is particularly the case when customers get actively engaged in building customized products online. The elements of a good playground — the feeling of familiarity as well as newness, freedom to explore, interact, build, tear down and rebuild, and fantasize (Norén-Björn, 1982) — enlivens the web experience, making it as enthralling and absorbing as play. Yet we also find differences in how users define a good playground. When people are goal or task-oriented, they view a good playground as one that offers challenge, is full of competition and fosters the need to win instead of lose. This style of interaction is akin to going after a target, as in hunting. However, when they are process-oriented or experience-oriented, they see a playground defined by cooperation, imagination and variety, which is akin to “gathering” rather than hunting. The website’s ability to provide customers displaying either behavior with a familiar playground makes it an engaging experience for the customer.

Overall, our results suggest that firms have to devote far more thought and care to how they design their websites to convey the appropriate brand image, especially for websites that provide “build-to-order” customization options. Whereas the tendency to separate work and play is a natural one, it is important to see how the two go hand-in-hand during the online product customization process. Both website personality and the playground analogy are important aspects of online product customization; a well-designed website can make an array of a few strategically chosen options seem like a nearly infinite continuum of choices.

2. Method

We conducted two exploratory studies to assess the value and validity of our conceptualization about website personality and websites as playgrounds. The first study was completed during Spring 2001, and the second study was completed during Spring 2002. Both studies were conducted as part of two different courses taught at an eastern university: a graduate course in product design and customization taught in the engineering school and an undergraduate advertising course taught in the business school. The two distinctly different groups allowed us to include participants with greater variation in backgrounds, and thereby, a wider range of interactions between participants and websites. Table 1 summarizes the participant profiles for the two studies. In both studies, before the in-depth interview, we gathered demographic information about the participants and documented their previous experiences with the Internet. In particular, we asked them about their experiences and knowledge about the company whose website they were instructed to browse. The participants then spent time browsing each website for 30 minutes so that they could become familiar with its design and functionality.

Insert Table 1 here.

Our decision to focus on online product customization was deliberate. The Internet is reshaping the “economics of information” (Iansiti & MacCormack, 1997) and is providing an infrastructure for distributing, sharing, and collecting information, opening new channels for promoting products, delivering services, and making sales (Shaw, 1999). As a result, customers engage in a richer and deeper experience with the brand in the online environment. Recognizing this, companies such as Dell are leading the way, not only in creating web interfaces that allow customers to configure their products but also in re-configuring their companies and supply chains to deliver these products to consumers. We therefore select the websites of such companies for our two studies as described in the sections that follow.

Study 1

In the first study, we focused on examining how website design elements relate to personality characteristics that participants attribute to the brand and the company during online product customization. We focused on websites of four computer companies, namely, Apple (<http://www.apple.com>), Gateway (<http://www.gateway.com>), IBM (<http://www.ibm.com>) and Dell (<http://www.dell.com>). The websites of all four companies allow customers to custom-configure products online. We studied website design elements that are both functional (e.g., price updates, online support options) as well as symbolic (e.g., colors, font, visual aids).

We asked each participant to select and visit the websites of two of the specified computer companies and customize a desktop computer for a hypothetical purchase. Because we are interested in how specific web elements influence consumer interactions and brand image formation, rather than on characterizing participant's current perceptions of brand image or how those brand images were altered by website interactions, we allowed participants to choose their own websites. We also allowed participants to choose their own navigation paths and web pages to accomplish the customization task. Allowing them to make their own decisions offered the added benefit of the participant's interest in the website itself, and also reflects the self-guided nature of consumer-website interactions in real life. Each participant spent about 30 minutes browsing through a website and was videotaped during the process for later analysis. We devised an open-ended "thought protocol" task to get participants to think aloud about design elements during the course of their website interactions. These questions included:

- "What do you immediately notice on this page?"
- "What stands out? Why?"
- "What does it make you think of?"
- "What characteristics do you (not) like?"

We randomized the pair of companies that each participant evaluated and also randomized the order in which they visited each pair of websites to ensure that eight different participants visited each website. Specifically, four participants (two each from engineering and business) viewed each of the following pairs: IBM/Dell, Gateway/Apple, Gateway/Dell, and IBM/Apple. We also interviewed the participants after they completed visiting each website. The interviews and post-discussions were videotaped to capture each participant's verbal and nonverbal reactions, emotions, and opinions for subsequent analysis. We catalogued and categorized their responses both qualitatively and quantitatively, and we paid particular attention to how the participants interpreted and reacted to a list of functional and symbolic elements of the websites they visited.

Study 2

We used the observations and insights gained from the first study to design our second study to investigate the extent to which a website is like a playground. In this study, we focused on the websites of ten well-known brands, each of which offered participants the ability to customize products online. These included websites of the four computer companies from the first study, two clothing companies [Levis (<http://www.levis.com>) and Gap (<http://www.gap.com>)], two sport-related companies [Nike (<http://www.nike.com>) and Eastbay (<http://www.eastbay.com>)], one car manufacturer [BMW (<http://www.bmw.com>)], and one online diamond jewel designer [DeBeers (<http://www.adiamondisforever.com>)]. We selected these websites based on their popularity, as revealed in an earlier survey of 105 undergraduate marketing students, who answered the question: "Which websites do you use to customize products?"

We asked each engineering student to choose one website from the four computer companies, given that these students find this product category highly engaging and are likely to spend time at such websites. Because the marketing students tend to have less interest in computers, they could choose any one of the ten websites. Both sets of students were told to

customize a product of their choice on the website they chose. We allowed them to choose their own web pages and navigation path in accomplishing the task given to them. Each participant spent about 45 minutes to an hour browsing through the website and was videotaped during the process. We devised another open-ended “thought protocol” consisting of several questions to get participants to verbalize their experiences on each web page and their interaction with the website during the course of the interview. Questions in the revised thought protocol included:

- “Tell me about your experience with this page.”
- “Does anything stand out as being important in influencing your experience at this website?”
- “What is this experience of browsing through the website most similar to, when compared with your everyday activities?”

The latter question was useful in gauging the feeling of play or leisure while customizing a product. The interview concluded with a post-test questionnaire for measuring quantitatively the participant’s experiences with the website.

3. Results and Findings

Our results are organized into the following sections to make it easier for the reader to interpret our findings and insights. We start by characterizing how our participants interacted with the websites, both in general and more specifically, in terms of goal versus process orientation. Next, we explore the various functional and symbolic elements of the websites that reflect website personality and influence the consumer’s brand experience, and ultimately, the brand image. Finally, we summarize the extent to which the playground analogy applies during the online customization process, the different kinds of play that customers engage in, and how this influences brand experience and brand image.

Characterizing website interactions: Goal versus process orientation

Although participants interacted in different ways with websites, they all easily and automatically associated the customization process with everyday activities. For instance, one participant (*Undergraduate male marketing student, Age 20*) transferred his feeling of “flow” on the website to the outside, non-web world. While enthusiastically customizing a shoe at the Nike website, he stopped looking at the computer screen to compare the shoes he was actually wearing to the shoes he had “made” at the website. He occasionally looked back and forth from the virtual world to the real world, using exclamations such as “sweet!” and “I’m pumped!” as if talking to himself. As this example illustrates, flow is so robust that people can literally, unknowingly and quite emphatically shift from the web world to the real world and vice-versa.

Beyond literal comparisons to real life, people easily verbalized their interactions using analogies to everyday life. A participant (*Graduate male engineering student, Age 24*) on the Apple website described it as “A well-designed website with an intuitive navigation scheme and easy-to-use customization options” that “makes my web experience as enjoyable and familiar as having a made to order ice-cream.” For this person, the multi-step customization experience of buying a computer, where one picks a model then chooses accessories, is similar to creating to the heart’s desire - choosing scoops of ice cream, and then choosing various toppings. Research has shown that ice cream in particular is associated with youth and innocence (Levy, 1981), implying a sense of regression and the pleasure and sheer fun of the process. The person in this case emphasizes the youthful freedom to choose at will, move around and explore different possible variations. On the other hand, another participant (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 22*) compared customization to “making dinner, a step-by-step process with a recipe.” Although equated with a leisurely activity, the customization process is viewed in this case as more rigid, mature, and leads to a particular, prescribed outcome.

As implied by these two examples, we found a distinct difference between students who were goal-oriented (who engage in “hunting”) and those who were process-oriented (who engage in “gathering”). The “hunting” style of behavior typically focuses on the functional benefits (see Keller, 1998) of online customization. While hunting, people prefer efficient transactions and prefer to arrive directly to the page they need, and liked to have their needs met with a few quick clicks. By contrast, the “gathering” style tends to focus on the experiential benefits of the process of customization. We also find a correlation with major, gender and education -- male graduate engineering students engaged in hunting, female undergraduate marketing students engaged in gathering -- though there are certainly exceptions, as the distinction between hunter hunting and gathering is based on observed online behaviors rather than on sharp demographic categorization. The analogy of hunting and gathering is supported also by a study by Novak, et al. (2000) who report two types of online activities: (1) *task-oriented* (work, online search for product information, and product purchase) and (2) *experiential* (fun and recreational activities as well as traditional non-goal-directed search, or “surfing”). They found that experiential uses of the Internet were positively correlated with the time spent online, while task-oriented activities were negatively correlated.

The distinction between task and experiential styles in web interactions offers a new area of application of the traditional ongoing search model (Bloch, et al., 1986). Customers going online for recreational purposes (i.e., “surfing”) will display the characteristics of ongoing searchers (those who search for the sake of knowledge and for the fun of it). Customers who are online with a task orientation will more closely resemble typical customers in a problem-solving mode (as in pre-purchase search). The same customers may exhibit either tendency, in different contexts. Thus, hunting and gathering behaviors are not mutually exclusive in their motivations. We also note that, in online product-customization, all customers are simultaneously opportunistic (e.g., short-term, efficient, goal oriented) as well as engaged in relationship

building (e.g., long-term, leisurely browsing, process oriented). While hunting and gathering are each simultaneously short-term and long-term oriented, we note in our study that those in the hunting mode focused more on completing the task, whereas those in the gathering mode enjoyed immersing themselves in the search/customization process.

For the hunting style of online interactions, it helps if the marketers make the brand image salient without evidently hindering the customer's progress on customization and purchase. The following comment from one participant when he first viewed the Dell homepage shows the importance of having the website navigation options displayed in such a way as to minimize navigation and search times, thus contributing to a positive user experience:

“This looks great. I can feel that I can shop online at this site; it comes to me naturally. I see everything in one shot; I don't have to scroll down at all. All I have to do is just click to get whatever information I want, there is also an option of selecting the country. This is how the home page of a website should be, it should be a map to the entire website.”

(Graduate male engineering student, Age 22)

This example illustrates the hunter's tendency to be as efficient as possible. During the short timeframe, the experience is still akin to “flow” because it is intense and absorbing. Such functionality is the key to making a website work for both those using the hunting or gathering modes, but we find that it is particularly important for hunting types as they tend to value functionality over aesthetics.

By contrast, for those in the gathering mode a website is about the experience, the aesthetics, the options, the freedom to choose and explore, and the creativity. The gatherer's tendency is to take into account the “little” design details that contribute to the feeling of the website. For example, one participant (*Graduate male engineering student, Age 24*) commented on the colors of the navigation buttons on the Apple website as well as the subtle “little things” in the website's design and layout that warm the customer to their web page. On the IBM

website, another participant (*Graduate male engineering student, Age 25*) described how the blue colors, image of a man dressed in a white shirt, crisp organization, and links to the sectors IBM serves give the website a professional look. Yet when he built a computer system, he noticed that IBM made a minor modification explained in a footnote. He felt this “legal move” made IBM seem “a little dishonest”, as did the graphics always showing the “top of the line” model. Unlike his experiences with other websites, this website also lacked the “little things” and had too much “small text”. In the gathering mode, the user is very focused on design elements that connote the personality of the website. Moreover, the more functional elements remain important as baselines as the user moves through the website. For example, he liked the drop-down menus on the customization page and said that it allowed him to quickly compare the available options, thus creating a better experience. At first he did not see the real-time price updates on the customization page, because he had a tendency to skip over things on the left of a web page. He likened his IBM website experience to “walking through a big dark room with candles. There was light, but not enough to clearly lead the way.” The participant’s attention to, and his remarks on, the colors, images, “legal move”, “top of the line”, “little things” and the “small text” conveys a sense of gathering, all of which contributed to a “50/50 experience”.

Website personality and design elements

Customers’ interactions with a website could form the basis of experiential benefits that they associate with the website and the brand. To develop a good understanding of how such experiences are formed, and how such experiences can be transformed into positive brand image, we need to identify the factors that shape these interactions. The “brand as person” perspective suggests a brand image that is richer and more complex than one based on product attributes. Like a person, a brand can be perceived as upscale, competent, impressive, trustworthy, fun, active, humorous, casual, formal, youthful or intellectual (Aaker, 1996). Aaker notes that just as human personalities affect relationships between people, brand personality can be the basis of a

relationship between the customer and the brand. For example, Dell Computer Corporation might be viewed as a professional who helps customers with skilled tasks such as building their own computers; Levis can be viewed as a rugged outdoor companion. A brand personality can eventually establish a long-term consumer-brand relationship such as friend, party companion or advisor (see Fournier, 1998). With the personality metaphor in place, relationship development becomes clearer and more motivating (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

A key finding in Study 1 is that some website design elements can be indicative of website personality. We focus on both functional and symbolic website design elements. Functional website design elements such as price updates, online customer support, radio buttons, drop-down menus, checkboxes and popup windows are designed to help users perform specific tasks and maneuver through the website. In contrast, symbolic website design elements such as the type and size of font, background colors and page layout lend aesthetics and a personality to the website. For example, the use of large fonts signals aggressive intent; a well-designed layout with an appropriate choice of color scheme conveys professionalism; good customer support and help options imply caring and concern for the customer. Table 2 summarizes the functional and symbolic elements explored in our studies. We developed a list of symbolic elements from an informal semiotic analysis of websites as well as participants' own responses to web design elements. We also derived a list of the functional elements by asking engineering students (in a task separate from our experiment) to carefully document the functional elements of websites known for online product customization.

Insert Table 2 here.

Another finding is that functional elements must be satisfactory for both hunting and gathering styles, though they are explicitly important for the hunting styles, which echoes Kano's

model for quality (Kano, et al., 1984). Kano distinguishes 3 categories of customer requirements: (1) *Expected requirements* are “self-evident” and unspoken. For example, one can expect that a car will drive and can stop. Even a 100% fulfillment of these aspects will never satisfy a customer. On the contrary, when these requirements are absent or exhibit a failure, customers will be dissatisfied. Kano calls them *dissatisfiers*. (2) *Revealed requirements* are expressed one way or the other. They are not hidden. The degree of fulfillment is linearly correlated with customer satisfaction, like asking for a specific interior of a car. Kano calls them *satisfiers*. (3) *Exciting requirements* are not expected and are not asked for. However, should they be available by the product, customer can become very excited, like having a GPS-system in a standard car at no extra cost. Kano calls them *delighters*.

Within the context of Kano’s model, many functional website design elements can be viewed as *dissatisfiers*: they are the basic elements of a website that customers expect will work correctly. Functional website design elements can create considerable downside (e.g., people quitting halfway through the process) when they are not present or are not working properly. For example, a programming error on the checkout page of the Apple website that automatically adds and increases product quantities and price when the users move back and forth between pages using the ‘Back’ button on the browser caused participants to comment that the company was dishonest and they would never purchase from the website.

Functional elements that help people navigate smoothly through the website, display greater product variety and customization options, or speed-up the purchase process are *satisfiers*. For one participant (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 21*), her positive online experience at Amazon.com, which was a very easy process to follow, provided a contrast to the Nike website, whose structure was rather hard to follow. Whereas Amazon.com’s online shopping was “bam, bam, bam” right to the checkout, the same was not quite as intuitive on Nike.com, especially with respect to the customization steps. The set of functional elements of a

website represents a baseline for both hunting and gathering. Given the potential downside of failed functional design elements, website tend to focus on improving functional elements.

Well-designed symbolic elements make people feel good about the brand and the purchasing process and are often *delighters*. For example, participants customizing shoes at the Nike website delighted at the ability to watch the shoes change color on the screen, while those visiting the DeBeers website were similarly delighted by their ability to change and view sidestones at will. These websites provide instantaneous response. Thus, well-designed symbolic elements can create considerable upsides and can improve the consumer experience at a website.

More importantly, functional website design elements can also imply website personality characteristics. When the participants encountered difficulties with the functional design elements, these difficulties had negative consequences for the brand's personality. The following example illustrates how a participant reacted when unable to locate the customization page even after clicking several times at various pages on the website:

“It’s been 4-5 clicks and I haven’t yet made it to the customization page. Seems to be a company strategy to show me more of their products.” (*Graduate male engineering student, Age 22*)

The participant interprets his inability to customize as a deliberate opportunistic “company strategy” which causes significant disappointment and aggravation, contributing to a negative brand experience. In this case, the company is viewed as devious and deceptive. From then on, the user’s experience spirals downward and may result in the customer switching to another provider, as customers’ tolerance for inconsistency and mediocrity is rapidly disappearing (Reichheld & Schefter, 2000). This was particularly true for experts in the product category (i.e., participants with a strong computer background) who were typically focused more on task efficiency and customizing with the best options.

Functional design elements like **pop up windows**, **bullet point comparisons**, and **price updates** signal personality characteristics as well. Pop up windows, in particular, can signify aggressive behavior. Participants complained about an invasion of privacy when windows pop up on their own without user-control. Participants leave with the impression that the company “seems to be in an aggressive mood to sell.” (*Undergraduate male marketing student, Age 20*) Bullet point comparisons and price updates signal a no-nonsense, up-front personality. Users generally want the prices displayed early on, at the outset, in their browsing process. At the same time, automatic price updates can signal empathy (being in the user’s shoes) and understanding:

“The auto price update (while customizing) feature makes me feel that the company cares more about its customers than other companies.” (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 19*)

The automatic price update feature is thus a *delighter* for some consumers, though it is a functional design element. At the same time, not displaying price upfront could convey a perception of professionalism and exclusivity, as one participant noted regarding hi-tech products (*Graduate male engineering student, Age 24*).

The typical company focus on functional elements, however, comes at the expense of realizing the upside potential of websites, namely, developing the brand personality and long-term relationship opportunities through symbolic design elements. To understand the effects of symbolic website design elements, consider how one participant (*Undergraduate male marketing student, Age 20*) interacted with IBM’s website. He clicked on the left-hand menu and other buttons to reach the customization page. As he began to customize his own desktop computer, he noticed a set of disclaimers in very small text. As he scrolled up and down the screen examining the disclaimer, he remarked:

“This is scary. You always hear about the read between lines, which would definitely make me read this for hidden costs. The font size is not good for reading. This makes me feel that they are trying to hide something.”

Minutes later, he selected his customized computer, which was the same as the one displayed on the page. The website then switched him to a new screen with an empty white background that contained only an error message (see Figure 2):



Figure 2: Error message on the IBM Website
(This is not an original screenshot from the website. It has been recreated for purpose of display only.)

Taken aback, he remarked:

“I’m confused. Slightly upset. It seems like they are screaming at me for going to this page. This text is aggressive, bigger than text on all other pages...They are trying to reinforce that they are IBM, a strong brand, and that you can trust them. But, it’s not reinforcing that to me. I go to configure and that was upsetting. I wouldn’t like to be on here much longer than that. They should make everything without any error because that is what I expect from them. They should be very professional.”

These comments suggest how a single website design element, font size, can influence and shape the customer’s perceptions of the brand’s personality. Seemingly common practices, like utilizing small text for disclaimers or large plain text for errors, can translate into devious interpersonal characteristics like hiding and cheating. The empty white background behind “No Such System Available” contributes to the feeling of aggression (“screaming”) and mistrust. In

short, respondents tend to second-guess the company and its intentions via such personality characteristics. These characteristics translate into a negative brand experience and a tarnished brand image. Overall, font size conveys the “tone” of the website personality (see Figure 3).

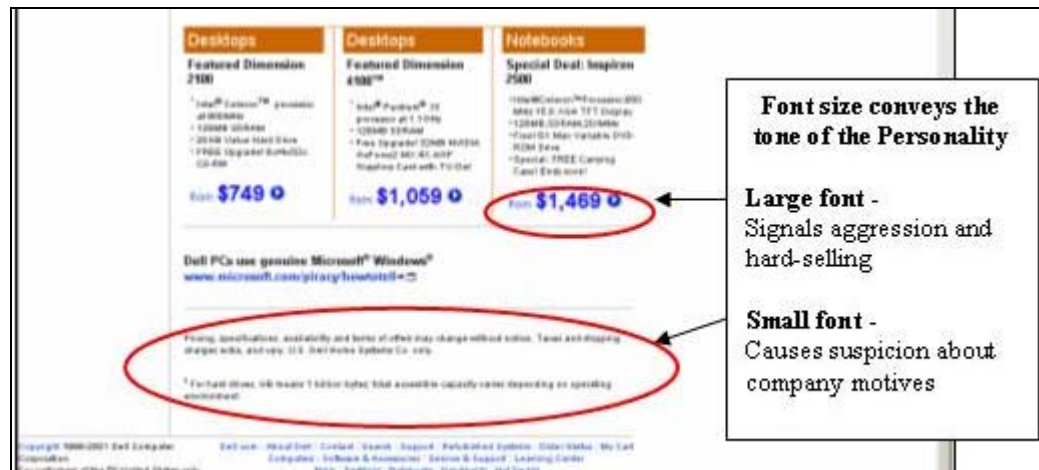


Figure 3: Examples of How Font Size Conveys the Tone of the Personality

However, a web design element like font can have multiple personality characteristics. Whereas users interpret large fonts as aggressive in the case above, Apple’s website uses larger font as a way of helping through the customization process (e.g., “Step 3: Do you need anything else?”) signals warmth, caring and an element of charisma (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Screenshot from the Apple website

Bold text can also be viewed as helpful and supportive rather than aggressive when highlighting particular options:

“The bold, highlighted text is eye catching. It makes me more interested to stay on the page. I am a fast clicker and generally do not read all the options.”

(Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 20)

For someone in a hunting mode, in particular, the bold text permits efficient, goal- or outcome-oriented behavior.

Symbolic elements should be designed with considerable finesse and take into account how the website personality fits with the long-term strategy for the brand. Consider how Apple’s website (see Figure 4) employs many salient symbolic design elements (e.g., different font sizes, colors, product image) that create a favorable image; however, there is also a negative consequence in that the company does not come across as a serious company. According to one participant:

“Seems that they [Apple] are trying to offer a fun image. The website does not have anything to say about their business philosophy.” *(Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 20)*

Moreover, we find that symbolic elements are important for all participants, though more explicitly embraced by those in the gathering mode, who tend to speak extensively about symbolic design elements and personality. For example, they discuss how web page colors reflect brand personality. The blue, white and gray colors used on the IBM website create an impression that IBM is a professional company (see Figure 5), while the use of fluorescent green and pink colors on the Apple website (see Figure 4) conveys a very different, less serious impression:

“This company [IBM] is professional. I associate the blue and white colors with professionals. The black computer that they have displayed adds to the professional look.” (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 19*)

“I don’t like the bubble gum colors on their [Apple] website....It seems to be a kid-oriented company.” (*Undergraduate male marketing student, Age 20*)

“[Referring to color...] If I had a kid I would not want them to use an Apple. I would prefer them to use Gateway because eventually they will have to learn to use it. This [Apple] is more for people who don’t know much about computers.” (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 20*)

The standard practice of using colors consistent with offline promotions is also important, as it gives customers confidence in the brand:

“I can associate blue and white with IBM. The colors give me confidence while buying.” (*Undergraduate male marketing student, Age 21*)

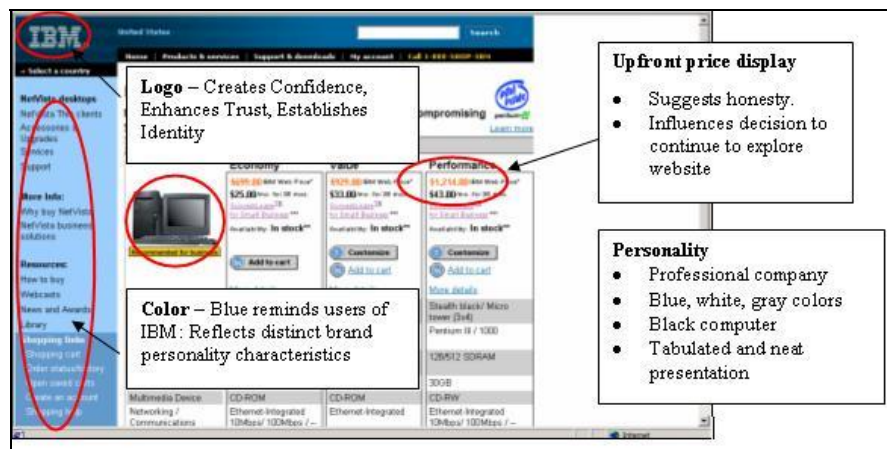


Figure 5: Website Design Elements on the IBM Website

The location of a design element also affects website personality. For example, the logo, when anchored on the website can imply feelings of trust. Because people in the western countries typically tend to look left first, logos in the upper left-hand corner signify solid trust

and longevity. At the same time, participants are troubled by “floating” logos in the middle of white space that seem to lack purpose. For example, on Gateway’s homepage during Study 1, the “floating” logo for the Salt Lake 2002 Winter Olympic Games made one participant uneasy as the logo seemed to be “floating in the middle of nowhere” (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 20*).

Gatherers tend to develop positive feelings toward the images of people presented on web pages. On Dell's homepage, for instance, the picture of a person looking straight at the participant conveyed a feeling of friendliness (see Figure 6).

“It [Dell Homepage] looks friendly because there is a guy looking at you.... Dell seems to say that we have computers for everyone, for someone like you, as opposed to IBM which seems to be business oriented.” (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 19*)

Similarly, the Gateway tagline “You’ve got a friend in the business” serves the purpose of conveying a friendly attitude in the absence of an image. Images of familiar objects on the website also help tie the web experience to the users’ personal experiences (see Figure 7).



Figure 6: A Screenshot from the Dell Homepage

Displaying the company phone number can help with the functioning of the website but it can symbolically provide positive, warm feelings about the company similar to images. Its presence on each web page suggests that the company provides support and is willing to help and act as a partner with its customers (see Figure 6). Comments like “I feel I am not alone” and “It’s not just help, but help ‘right now’” (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 20*) imply an appreciation for the helpful, caring nature of the brand. While the help option signals positive, warm brand associations, several informants were also quick to point out that they dislike when the website voluntarily offers “help” (e.g., via pop up windows, as mentioned earlier). A caring personality can quickly transfer into aggression. Such unsolicited information also implies the presence of an opportunistic *salesperson* rather than a caring *personality*. Similarly, participants perceived Gap, Inc. to be aggressive because of the website pushing products at the users. The Gap website presented the participants with other related clothing that matched their selections. Though well received by the participants at first, it annoyed them when it appeared repeatedly in spite of their decision not to purchase any of the recommended items. Most participants who browsed the various company websites suggested that such an action on the website reminded them of real-life salespeople pushing products on them. The participants were threatened by the loss of control that they wished for when shopping online.

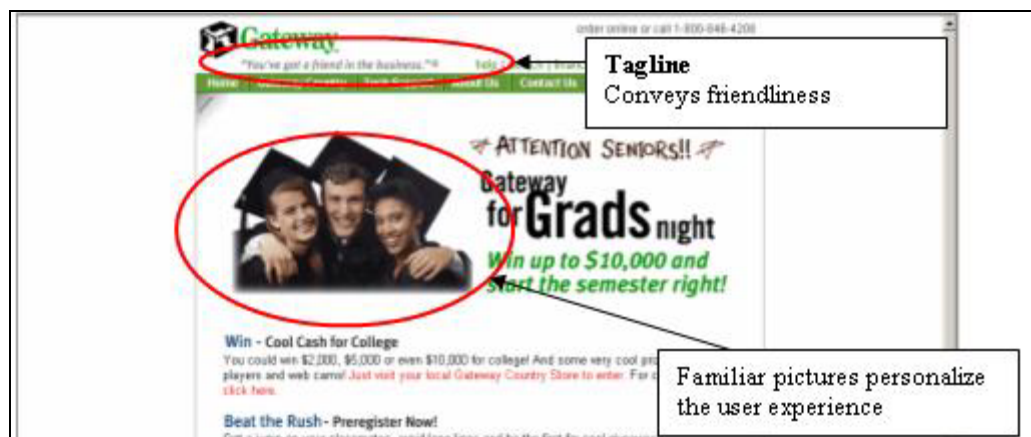


Figure 7: A Screenshot from the Gateway Website

Table 3 summarizes the major insights about how various website functional and symbolic elements convey personality characteristics to website users.

Insert Table 3 here.

Personality traits of websites

Based on the findings from the first study, we asked participants in our second study more directly to tell us the kinds of personalities they ascribe to web sites. Our aim was to see the extent to which those in hunting versus gathering modes make judgments about personality. We prepared a list of personality-trait words (Anderson, 1968) used to describe characteristics of people. After the participants completed the customization exercise, we asked them the following question, “If this website were a person, how would you describe its personality?” They could choose any number of traits from the following list and were free to add their own. Responses of 35 participants from Study 2 are summarized in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 here.

We were surprised to find that almost all of the participants used positive traits to describe company personality after viewing their respective websites. Participants commonly chose such traits as friendly, approachable, reliable, professional, honest, responsible, and trustworthy to describe the personality of a website. Thus, it is clear that people automatically assign personality traits (mostly positive) to websites, suggesting that they view websites as having distinct personalities. Moreover, since the exercise reveals more positive and glossy feelings about the brand, this also suggests that the multidimensional design characteristics from Study 1 give us a deeper, and more textured understanding of the positive and negative inferences customers make about a website’s personality.

The hunters' playground and gatherers' playground

Thus far, we have established that website personality captures part of the brand experience—the part directly relevant to attributes of the website itself. Yet the brand experience must also include the customer's ability to engage and interact with the online environment created by a website. Though a simulated environment, a website offers opportunities for customers to engage in “serious play” of the type that may or may not be possible in the physical world (e.g., customizing colors of a shoe at will). In fact, one might even argue that simulated worlds are really for playing (Schrage, 2000).

How are websites like playgrounds? According to human development research (Norén-Björn, 1982), some characteristics of good play are that it:

- is intensive and absorbing.
- prompts exploration.
- provides a variety of options.
- allows play materials to be altered, destroyed and rebuilt.
- is familiar.
- allows one to try new things.
- is a responsive environment.

Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defines flow as an optimal experience characterized by:

- a sense of playfulness.
- a feeling of being in control.
- concentration and highly focused attention.
- mental enjoyment of the activity for its own sake.
- a distorted sense of time.
- a match between the challenge at hand and one's skills.

User interactions with the websites seem to reflect all these elements. Regardless of whether one is in a hunting or gathering mode, it is not unusual to become absorbed and focused in the process of interacting with the website, particularly in the context of online product customization. People desire the familiarity of the context, enjoyment, a feeling of being in control, the freedom to move around the website, and the opportunity to explore different product options and configurations. Online product customization provides a platform for customers to express their creativity in building, creating, and altering products in an environment that encourages them to do so. In several ways, our *playground* construct resembles the *flow* construct.

In many cases, participants literally equated their experiences with play: jigsaw puzzles, chess, Barbie dolls, working on one's car for fun, dating, making ice cream sundaes, driving on the beach, and watching television. Yet "play" is not a monotonic concept. Some playground analogies involve strategy, challenge and competition, similar to the notion of a hunter who seeks a target and works to achieve it. Other playground analogies involve imagination free form playing and cooperation, which is akin to a gatherer who enjoys self-expression and the process of exploring various options. In our study, we observed that the playgrounds of the hunters were different from the playgrounds of the gatherers. In the hunting mode, a playground is characterized by win/loss, challenge, competition, and following a clear-cut but unspoken set of rules. In a gathering mode, a playground is characterized by cooperation and fantasy, without particular rules nor a winner or loser.

A good website, like a good playground, should be **intensive and absorbing** and also allow for **exploration**. This was certainly the case for all the participants, though aspects of the website can add to or detract from such feelings, depending on whether the website is viewed as a hunter's or a gatherer's playground. Consider the display of price. According to one participant customizing a desktop on the Dell website:

“It is similar to a game of chess because it involves strategy. Being able to get the best you can for the price you can afford is just like winning a game.” (*Undergraduate male marketing student, Age 22*)

This example illustrates that, from a hunting perspective, competition against the brand can be healthy and rewarding and an *expected* part of the play experience. Price displays can make a hunter’s sense of play much more competitive, aggressive, absorbing and enjoyable. Similarly, while customizing a computer on the IBM website, another hunter-type views the process as similar to “solving a jigsaw puzzle whereby one can try out different combinations and check if they matched my price budget.” (*Graduate male engineering student, Age 23*). Again, the person’s experience is based on the need to find an optimal solution using pricing knowledge as part of the goal. Similarly, another participant (*Graduate male engineering student, Age 25*) who also identified the customization process as a “jigsaw puzzle.” He said that the auto price update feature allowed him to creatively play around with different combinations until he reached an optimal solution within his \$2,000 personal spending limit.

On the other hand, in a gathering mode, playground analogies rely on fantasy such that price display can have undesired effects on play. Price information can take away the freedom to explore and can put restrictions on play and hinder the fantasy experience. A participant who viewed DeBeers’ engagement ring website described her experience as being similar to child-like playing with Barbie dolls:

“It was like a little girl’s silly fantasy of having a diamond ring. Customizing a diamond ring was like dressing a Barbie doll. No display of the price added to the feeling of play.” (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 21*)

For this participant, if the price was shown and continually updated throughout the process, it would have taken away from the fantasy and childhood playfulness of the experience. Other female informants browsing the DeBeers diamonds website were also very absorbed in the

process. One participant (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 22*) even began to think positively about the whole online shopping process as she peered very intently into the screen the entire time. Gatherers willfully ignore practicality in order to sustain feelings of fantasy and exploration.

By contrast, when the DeBeers website is viewed from the perspective of a hunter's playground, the lack of practicality and achieving the goal becomes problematic. One male participant who browsed this website felt that he was wasting time because the website does not permit online purchase after customization. In spite of the website's easy and intuitive navigation, his interaction was fruitless. To make matters worse, no information appeared when he clicked on the "Find a local Jeweler" option. He compared the experience to sitting through an introductory business class, "where you are forced to listen to stuff you already know" (*Undergraduate male marketing student, Age 25*). He was forced to focus on the process of customization without a clearly achievable goal of purchase. Hunting types rated the shopping experience as productive only if they could customize or obtain products of their choice and add them to their shopping carts. While common sense might imply that price should always be updated to give the user control, price can be restricting if viewing play as youthful fantasy (e.g., playing with Barbies) rather than goal oriented, serious strategy (e.g., chess). Thus, the type of playground, whether a hunter's or gatherer's, will impact important marketing strategies such as price updates on websites.

A good website, like a good playground, also contains a **variety of options** and allows the play materials (product choices) to be **altered, destroyed and recreated**. A well-designed website can appear to offer a seemingly large number of options. For hunters hunting, the variety should seem plentiful but efficient. For gathering, efficiency is less important than becoming absorbed in a large variety of possibilities. One participant visiting the Dell website remarked, "It is like being at the dorm cafeteria where one can pick and choose a meal from what is

available; you can choose what you want.” *Consequently, a well-designed website can make an array of a few strategically chosen options (suitable for hunting) actually seem like an infinite combination of choices (suitable for gathering).* One gatherer, in particular, compared his shopping experience to “dating girls” and “adding/changing parts on his car.” Dating, like modifying his car, is a process of frequently trying out new alternatives, hoping to eventually find a match *though not necessarily immediately.* Thus, while customizing the product, he engages in a form of self-expressive play, which permits him to create, destroy, and re-create at will. Other gatherers compared the customization process to an endless array of buffet items and creating ice cream sundaes, which are similarly self-expressive and focused on the creation and re-creation of various combinations. A more goal-directed participant, who viewed the Nike website, compared the shoe design selection option to flipping through a set number of channels on a television until finding something that looks good.

A good website, like a good playground, can also engender feelings of **familiarity**. On a hunters’ playground, familiarity with the website allows the user to control the customization process at will, adding to a positive experience. For gatherers, familiarity is directly related to not only the brand experience but also brand image. For example, as one of the gatherers (*Undergraduate female marketing student, Age 21*) began to customize a car on the BMW website, she mentioned that the car on the screen made her feel she was driving that car on a beach. The image reminded her of a movie from her childhood wherein the lead actor did just that; she always aspired to do the same. The BMW website conjures up familiar images which absorb her in the online experience, allowing her to associate fantasy and aspirations with the brand name.

Finally, a good website, like a good playground, creates a **responsive environment** in which players feel they can try new things, are heard and watched over in the process, and are given guidance to learn and grow from the experience. Several websites demonstrated

responsiveness. The aforementioned examples of the participant who was excited to see the shoes that he “made” on the Nike website and the automatic price update feature on the IBM website provided participants with instantaneous responses.

Personality and play

While we are currently not focused on the intermixing of personality and play, it is fairly clear that the two analogies work in tandem. For example, in the hunting mode, the personality of the opposing player in the game (i.e., the website) becomes an influencing factor in the website playground experience. An opportunity to play with a competent opponent with a likeable personality is considered a rewarding experience, and properly designed websites can provide users with such opportunities. On the other hand, in the gathering mode, one seeks a playground filled with open, flexible attributes that may translate into warm, welcoming personality characteristics.

Personality and play can also clash if not well coordinated. For example, displaying the price upfront can help build trust with the brand. This is useful for playing on a website that feels like a game of strategy (e.g., chess); however, for a website that prompts fantasy (e.g., playing with Barbies and DeBeers), upfront price display can limit the fantasy. Thus website elements that influence trust in the brand can clash with the need for fantasy.

4. Emergent Insights

Here, once again, are the main findings of the study. On the web, brand image is tied to the brand experience which includes: (1) the personality characteristics of the website, and (2) the extent to which interactions at the website is similar to the experience of being on a playground (especially in the context of online product customization). We note in particular that:

- Website users naturally engage in social attributions, such that the websites are viewed as having personality characteristics. As a result, customers create personal, emotional bonds with websites, and as a consequence, with the brand represented at the website.
- In many ways, the offline interactions with a *person* (e.g., salesperson) are transferred to online interactions with a *web personality*.
- Website personality is multidimensional and is tied to many seemingly minute design elements of the website such as font size, colors, and images.
- During online product customization, customers are simultaneously opportunistic, or in a hunting mode (short term, efficient, goal oriented), as well as engaged in relationship building, or in a gathering mode (long term, browsing, process oriented). Yet, in any given session, customers tend to anchor on either hunting or gathering in practice.
- Websites often prompt optimal stimulation or “flow” during online product customization. The website becomes a natural playground filled with intensity, exploration, variety, creativity, familiarity, newness, and responsiveness, and the nature of the play can range from being literal to being figurative.
- Similar to a good playground, a good website can enable both hunters and gatherers to play, and to have a favorable experience (i.e., a good game). What seems like a focused, efficient set of options designed for hunters can be made to feel like a continuum of options for the gatherers to explore.
- Any glitch in the playground, no matter how early or late in the customization process, can have a negative influence on brand image (e.g., loss of a responsive environment when the website makes a mistake on a final check out page).
- Play is not monotonic. It can contain elements that represent focus as well as elements that represent exploration. It can be competitive as well as cooperative.

- A website that customers see as having a favorable personality and as a welcome playground contributes to the strength, favorability and uniqueness of the brand image.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The inherent efficiencies and the nearly infinite reach of the Internet have made it an increasingly important medium for reaching customers and an efficient means for online product customization. The fact that the customers can customize and/or build products best suited to their needs using a web-based interface has lead to the need for understanding how customers' interactions with the website affect their perceptions of the brand.

Much of the current practice of brand building occurs in offline broadcast media (e.g., Newspapers, Billboards) where there is really no direct interaction between the communicator and the customer. Likewise, almost all of academic research on brand building has also focused on understanding brand image formation in non-interactive media (Aaker, 1991; Aaker, 1996; Biel, 1992; Keller, 2003; Park, et al., 1986). At the same time, online media are interactive, where customers interact with websites as they gather information or make purchases. In fact, traditional notions of store “atmospherics” (Kotler 1973/74) are analogous to the digital “experiential” environment. We need both new conceptualizations and empirical analyses to assess how interactive media influence the formation of brand image.

The reference to human traits to describe their interactions with websites reinforces previous research documenting that people perceive human-computer interactions in a manner akin to human-human interactions (Reeves & Nass, 1996; Nass & Moon, 2000). Because of this intrinsic nature of customers to humanize websites, we also found customers develop relationships with websites (and the brands they represent) as if they were people. The personality of a website is shaped by its design elements and the characteristics of the interaction experience it offers customers. In particular, we find that a lack of good functional website design elements (e.g., automatic price updates, online customer support, pop up windows)

elements can adversely impact brand value, but *good functional elements do not by themselves enhance brand image*. On the other hand, well-designed symbolic website design elements (e.g., color, font size and style) convey desirable web personality traits, which in turn, can enhance the perceived quality of the interactions at the website and the image of the associated brand. Brand familiarity and the type of product offered at a website (e.g., whether the product is highly involving for the customer) moderates the extent to which functional and symbolic website design elements influence the perceived personality traits and the subsequent impact on brand image.

The offline world also offers opportunities for direct interactions with customers, which can influence brand image formation. For example, customer interactions with salespeople and service staff could influence customer satisfaction and brand image (Oliver & Swan, 1989), as could the physical surroundings of the store environment itself (Bitner, 1990), but such offline interactions are qualitatively different from the self-paced and (potentially) anonymous nature of interactions at websites. We used the metaphor of a playground to describe the context in which interactions occur in the online medium. For online product customization tasks, we do find that the website takes on the characteristics of a playground, at least for customers who are strongly engaged with the product category of interest.

The two central ideas in our paper, namely, website personality and websites as playgrounds, suggest new ways of thinking about designing websites to convey the desired brand image. Based on our study results, findings, and insights, we offer the following guidelines for companies and managers when designing websites that offer customer brand experiences that enhance their company's brand image.

1. **Design websites for flexibility.** Good website design calls for flexibility to either facilitate quick transactions for goal-directed customers to hunt or encourage browsing and relationship building for customers who want to explore or gather. In fact, the

challenge for website designers is to provide a seamless way to cater to the online needs and demands of either type of customers (or, the same customer behaving differently on different occasions).

2. **Design the web-interface to be consistent with the real-world presence of the company.** Use colors and fonts on the website that resemble store décor, advertisements, and promotions in other media help in increasing the customers' familiarity with the brand (e.g., the blue and white color scheme on the Gap website reminded participants of Gap). This calls for some level of coordination between website designers, store interior designers and advertising professionals, to make sure that they all strike a similar chord. Moreover, product customization and purchase online should be intuitive and systematic.
3. **Strategically provide product customization options on the web.** The ability to customize a product provides customers with a means of self-expression, a sense of control and the opportunity to be creative. *This is particularly important for gathering types, and true for hunting types only as long as the process seems efficient.* A visual display of the customized product further enhances the experience and the means of customization (customization buttons) should be clearly visible. Based on the number of available number of product and service choices for customers, web designers need to make judicious use of drop-down menus, check boxes and radio buttons for presenting customizable options.
4. **Minimize the downside potential of functional design characteristics; maximize the upside potential of symbolic design characteristics.** The functional website design elements help people make quick purchases, and people expect websites to be designed efficiently for this purpose. At the same time, the symbolic web design elements convey brand personality and enable relationship building. The benefits of symbolic website

design elements will be most obvious with gatherers though hunters will also value such elements as long as they do not hinder the customization process.

5. **Use appropriate symbols to reflect distinct brand “personality” characteristics.**

- *Colors.* For example, the blue and white *colors* used on the IBM website create an impression that IBM is a professional company, while the use of fluorescent colors on the Apple website give an impression of a fun attitude.
- *Font size conveys “tone” and “personality”.* Under potentially negative circumstances (e.g., errors or disclaimers), users interpret large font size as aggressive, whereas fine print creates suspicion in the user’s mind about the company’s motives; however, during the process of customization, larger font is considered as a way of helping and can signal warmth and caring.
- *Logos convey “trust” for well-known brands.* A company logo helps establish the website brand identity. Displaying the logo on the top left of every page engenders trust, reassurance, and confidence while on a website.
- *Pop up windows signal “aggression”.* Users sense an invasion of their privacy when windows pop up on their own. Participants leave with the impression that the company is resorting to aggressive sales tactics. Moreover, popup windows signal a non-responsive environment that is purely opportunistic; they are also akin to unwelcome “salespersons” rather than welcome personalities.
- *Online support options signal caring.* Display of the company phone number and other forms of online support (e.g., chat, email link) on each web page suggests that the company is willing to help its customers.
- *Human images convey a personal and friendly image.* Gatherers overtly develop relationships with the human images that they view on web pages. On Dell's

homepage, for instance, the picture of a person looking straight at the user contributes to feelings of friendliness.

6. **Display price early in the customization process only if strategically sound.** An upfront display of the product price helps build trust (personality) but may diminish the ability to fantasize about the product experience (playground). Therefore, price should be displayed on websites based on the company strategy to either convey an honest and upfront personality or to allow website users to fantasize and play.
7. **Display product features and highlights early in the buying process.** A side-by-side comparison of available alternatives can make the customer's decision-making process easy and enjoyable.
8. **Do not aggressively push products or services at customers; instead, engage them.** Customers want to be in control when they are browsing a website; so allow them to make their own decisions on product selection and purchase. For example, although it could be profitable to list accessories as soon as the customer selects a product, such accessories should not be displayed again if the customer rejects them once. Customers perceive that websites should be "salesperson free" environments (not necessarily "sales technique free" environments), and in-the-face marketing is contrary to these expectations.
9. **For hunters (or those in a hunting mode) do not display products that cannot be purchased online, or are out of stock.** Some users, usually those who are goal-oriented, perceive their interaction with the website as productive only if they are able to make their desired purchases directly on the web.
10. **Design and test the check-out page carefully – it is the most important page when offering customization options.** Any errors in the product, pricing, or product quantities can be disastrous. Customers take such mistakes seriously, which can easily dissuade a

user from making a purchase. Such errors can also lead to customers perceiving the company to be dishonest and unprofessional. Participants who viewed the Apple website in Study 2 had such an experience, and viewed the company as less favorable than before the visit.

11. Design the website personality and its playground characteristics to reinforce each other. As mentioned earlier, personality and play can clash if not well coordinated in matters involving price, competition vs. cooperation and goal-orientation vs. fantasy.

The ability to interact with websites while customizing and shopping for products, the freedom to explore, the opportunity to create, compete, are all elements that characterize good play, thus making the process and experience much more absorbing and enjoyable. However, the basic reality is that human beings have unique personalities, making it difficult to apply our recommendations uniformly across customers. Delighters for the gatherers may be satisfiers for hunters. The same website can be “patronizing and condescending” to one customer and “elegant and sophisticated” to another. The reinforcing effects of good or bad experiences also depend on the attitudes of the users. Therefore, we recommend that managers who plan to re-design their websites based on our study and its findings should first test and evaluate the planned changes with their target segments before implementation. However, for managers willing to undertake such re-design, the upside opportunities could be very attractive. Their websites will not only look good and offer good information, but also deliver the appropriate brand experiences.

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Tables

Table 1: Participant Profile

	Study 1	Study 2
Number of participants	16	44
Academic specialization		
- Engineering	8	24
- Marketing	8	20
Age Range (years)		
- Engineering	22-25	22-32
- Marketing	20-22	20-26
Gender		
- Engineering	8 male	23 male, 1 female
- Marketing	2 male, 6 female	9 male, 11 female
Internet Usage (Total - hours/week)		
- Engineering	NA	3-35
- Marketing	NA	3-40
Internet Usage (Avg. - hours/week)		
- Engineering	NA	15
- Marketing	NA	10
% who have bought products online (Combined)		
- Engineering	88	83
- Marketing	75	72

Table 2: Functional and Symbolic Elements Studied (Study 1)

Functional Elements	Symbolic Elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Price updates based on user customized options ▪ Pop up windows ▪ Drop-down menus ▪ Radio buttons ▪ Checkboxes ▪ Technical product information ▪ Online customer support (usefulness) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Web page layout ▪ Colors ▪ Font size and style ▪ Company logo and tagline ▪ Visual images ▪ Location of navigation menu ▪ Information density ▪ Online customer support (meaningfulness)

Table 3: Website Design Elements and Their Effect on Personality

Website Design Element	Personality Attributes, Effects on Customers
Font Size	Font size conveys the tone of the website personality.
Large/Bold Font	Large font conveys aggression and hard selling in most cases. In some cases bold text can also be viewed as helpful and supportive.
Small Font	Fine print creates suspicion in the user's mind about the company's motives. Company is perceived as dishonest.
Colors	Colors reflect brand personality.
Blue, Gray, Black	Professional, Serious
Fluorescent Colors	Rebellious, Kid-oriented, Fun-loving, Lacks seriousness.
Logo	Presence of a logo on the website is reassuring to customers. Conveys constancy, reliability, and trustworthiness.
Human Images	Images of smiling faces convey friendliness, and humanize the user experience, making the experience more personal.
Price Displays	Clearly visible price displays signal no-nonsense, upfront honest personality. In some cases not displaying the price upfront conveys a perception of professionalism and exclusivity, especially for hi-tech products. Alternatively, in some cases if prices are not displayed, it conveys an invitation to play – an inviting and playful personality.
Pop up Windows	Aggression.
Online Support (1-800 number)	Approachable, Considerate, Friendly.

Table 4: Participants' responses on Personality Characteristics of Websites (Study 2)

	Company										
	Apple	BMW	Dell	DeBeers	Eastbay	Gap	Gateway	IBM	Levis	Nike	Total
Number of participants who viewed company's website:	5	3	5	5	2	3	3	5	1	3	35
Number of participants who described the company as:											
Reliable	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	3	0	0	17
Unpredictable	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	4
Unfriendly	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Friendly	4	2	2	4	2	2	2	3	1	3	25
Bossy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Considerate	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	3
Approachable	3	2	3	3	1	2	2	4	0	1	21
Excitable	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	3
Serious	2	1	1	1	0	0	2	2	0	1	10
Fun-Loving	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2
Aggressive	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	3
Professional	4	2	4	2	0	0	1	4	0	1	18
Rude	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bold	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	3
Perfectionist	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dishonest	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Honest	0	1	2	0	2	2	1	2	0	1	11
Trustworthy	2	2	1	2	1	1	0	2	0	1	12
Responsible	1	1	2	1	0	2	1	1	0	0	9
Loud-Mouthed	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
Rebellious	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2

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