



Media E-Branding and its Antecedents: A Case from Iranian Online News Agencies

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate online brand creation with respect to specific features of the media industry. The data were gathered from subscribers of the websites of news agencies, and the findings were achieved using the structural equation modeling. The findings maintain the conceptual model of the study, and the results indicated that brand personality, online content, interactivity, and website-attribute along with the online reader motivation, influence the online brand creation for news agencies. Results also confirmed that there is mediation effect on the online reader motivation from online content, interactivity and website-attributes towards the online brand creation for the news agencies.

Keywords: Online Brand Creation, E-Branding, Media Branding, News Agency.

Introduction

The concept of brand and its significance to marketing has been widely studied in the marketing (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Kapferer, 2001; Keller, 2003; Parent & Séguin, 2008). The concept of brand in the consumer goods and services has been studied largely but few empirical surveys have been devoted to conceptualize brand in the media industry. The media industry consists of newspapers, magazines, television, and radio channels. News agencies and news sources are collectively described as the alternative media providers to reporting, which emphasizes on a self-defined non-corporate view. Two technological innovations have changed the media industry; first, the use of satellite; and second, the evolution of internet. These trends have increased the competitive pressure on the market and have also changed the preferences of the audiences. The entry of more market competitors means that the competitive dimensions of the news service have moved from the old fashioned to the modern paradigm; in which, a variety of options are made available, for the audiences to select from the numerous news providers. In this competitive market, audiences

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can easily change their source of news. Hence, a unique news brand image is fetching more vital in the chase for ratings and superiority in the media marketplace.

This study aims to provide empirical evidence about the online brand creation in media industry, and to contribute towards a better understanding of the nature of brand in the news market.

The next segment explained hypothetical studies of the variables presented in this study: online branding, brand personality, online content, website-attributes, interactivity, and online-reader-motivations. This review is the basis for the developing research hypotheses, theoretical model and relationships projected between the variables studied. The measurement scales, methodological aspects of the experimental study and the final results are presented in the latter section of the this paper. News agencies are selected as an important component of the media industry. Discussions and conclusions are drawn from the data tabulation, analysis and findings at the end of this paper.

Literature Review

“Brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, design or a combination of these, which identifies with the maker or seller of the product or services” (Kotler, Armstrong, & Cunningham, 2005, p.549). Differentiation is one of the most important functions of a brand (Shakiba and Jalali, 2013). According to Kapferer (2004), a brand is a power, which has an impact on a buyer and this impact is achieved through mental associations and relationships built over a span of time. Brand could also be described as a promise for delivering a specific set of characteristics, services, benefits or experiences to consumers on a constant basis (Kotler, Armstrong & Cunningham, 2005). It is suggested that a well-built brand provides a company with a point of disparity/difference, which in turns can give a competitive advantage (Kapferer, 2001; Keller, 2003; Parent & Séguin, 2008). Hayes, Alford, Silver, and York (2006), referred brand as an ‘active relationship partner’ as consumers tend to create a relation with the brand they purchase. In the media industry, brand is how the audience perceives the news provider; since images, feelings, and meanings are conjured up in people's minds, when they think about or use the specific news service, such as the news agencies’ websites.

The internet is always under transformational phase and it has affected the delivery of products and services. Media is one of the industries, which has been effected by the use of internet and the online delivery/distribution (Flaviàn & Gurrea, 2006). Content management systems, broadband networks and peer to peer communications etc change the media sector and also shape new rules for the industry (Ghachem, 2011). While many news agencies have launched their online editions in an attempt to follow or stay ahead of their audiences, new competitors have entered the market and running their own online news based services. However, despite the evolution and rapid development of the online news agencies, they still lack a clear branding strategy to attract more visitors and turn them into loyal audiences (Treiblmaier, 2006). Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000, p. 237) have specified six tools for building online brands: website, email, web public-relation, intranet, customer extranet, advertising and sponsoring content. It’s a framework for building an online brand; website plays the most critical role, since it can be designed and customized based on the needs and preferences of the website users. From another view point, Stuart and Jones (2004) mentioned that websites are not holding brand values so strongly and should be taken as a complement to other media communication instruments and tools. With the pace of time, the conventional news and new online news brands will blend in future, which will be attained through new media integration by utilizing communications tools and strategies (Treiblmaier, 2006).

Brand Personality

Personality is taken as a self-concept and it is linked with the brand attributes and associations. As Chien, Cornwell and Pappu (2011) described brand personality as the set of human attributes associated with a brand, which was ultimately taken from Aaker (1996, p.105) brand personality definition. Brand personality is an antecedent of customer based brand equity (Buil, De Chernatony & Martínez, 2008; Shakiba & Jalali, 2013; Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007). Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004) studied the effect of brand personality and brand contravention with the brand relationship quality. The brand personality reflects the real or ideal self-concept of the target consumers. It is a key for brand managers to identify the self concept traits/attributes of their target consumers and build a brand and its personality in order to match the self concept of their consumers. Brand personality is conceptualized by Aaker(1996) in five dimensions and consists of: excitement, sincerity, sophistication, competence and ruggedness (Alvarez & Harris, 2002). Govers and Schoormans (2005) outlined that people choose those products/brands, which associates with their self-image. On the other hand, personality traits are indirectly developed through associations with product related attributes; so, the way a news headline is made up and is presented also provides opportunities for the brand personality development. Chan and Cha (2007) modified the Aaker's (1996) scale for news brand personality and added one extra dimension to it, which is news-specific characterization; described as traditional, analytical, dramatic, serious, conservative, experienced, liberal and reputable news brand personalities.

Online Content

Content plays a crucial role when the business is related to production and distribution of information. In the field of this study, content was defined as the information on the news agency's website, containing: general news, analytical reports, breaking-news, interviews, and general information about weather forecasting or stock market condition. Treiblmaier (2006) stated that accuracy of the news is extremely important on time for placing it online. It has also been seen that the news content is place on time but the quality is not fine. Ghachem (2011) introduced five attributes of the online content in the media industry as: updated, value-added, customized, coverage and richness. News agencies are now being rated for providing quality news online and on time.

Interactivity

Integrating the interactivity of the internet based tools with the news service brings one with valuable insight and is the modern paradigm of news platform (Ghachem, 2011). It has not only facilitated communication and customization of information but also entails entertainment and image manipulation for the customer (Fiore & Jin, 2003). Simmons (2007) considered interactivity as one of the four components of the online branding strategy along with: marketing communication, understanding customers, and content. An interactivity in media studies is mainly based on three facets: criteria, prototypic examples and/or characteristics that must be fulfilled and continuum models (Ghachem, 2011). Two types of strategies could be applied to enhance interactivity, pure online communication, and pure offline communication. To create and maintain interactivity, a news agency website could use: free email newsletters, RSS feeds, reporter blogs, commenting services, chat rooms, mobile content, social networking, and user generated content.

Website Attributes

The website attributes could be studied from three features: ease of use, security and customer care (Ghachem, 2011). Customer care is seen as a very important aspect of an online branding strategy. Customer-service email, 24 hour telephone-lines and electronic customer-relationship management systems could be established as customer care services. Users online connection/inter connections and sharing of information on a particular website is yet another feature for website attribute and holds a lot of importance in relevance to share information and ideas instantly (Tsiames & Siomkos, 2003).

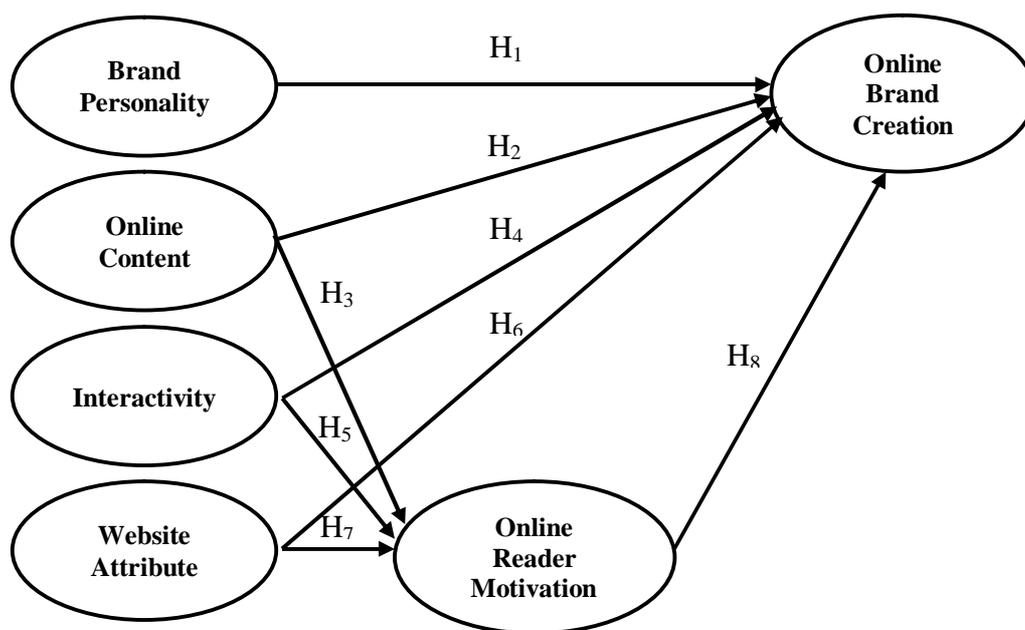
Online Reader Motivation

In the proposed conceptual model of Ghachem (2011), the online reader motivation construct is predicted by the online content, website attributes, and interactivity, and is also antecedent for the level of substitutability of the news provider’s website. Online readers have different purposes when using the news agency’s websites; they may search for updated news and analytical reports in the specific fields or use the website to gain information, or even for entertainment. Some news agencies try to focus on few special fields and gain expertise; it helps them motivate their audiences to regularly visit their website.

Conceptual Framework

The literature review made a comprehensive understanding about this paper and hence, the conceptual framework as shown in figure 1, highlights the important factors revolving around this research. The framework of the study comprises of six variables and the relationships between them; brand personality, online content, interactivity, website attribute, and online reader motivation are used to explain the online brand creation in the media industry, especially for the news agencies.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Study



The directions, which are depicted in the framework, tests the direct and indirect relationship between the defined research constructs.

The following hypotheses have been formulated:

- H₁:** Brand personality has a direct impact on the online brand creation
H₂: Online content has a direct impact on the online brand creation
H₃: Online content has a direct impact on the online reader motivation
H₄: Interactivity has a direct impact on the online brand creation
H₅: Interactivity has a direct impact on the online reader motivation
H₆: Website attribute has a direct impact on the online brand creation
H₇: Website attribute has a direct impact on the online reader motivation
H₈: Online reader motivation has a direct impact on the online brand creation

Methodology

This study is aimed to develop a foundation for explaining the online brand creation in the media industry. The current study has focused on the Iranian news agencies' brands. The media industry of Iran consists of many news agencies, governmental and non-governmental, comprising of many users. The sample size is 450 respondents out of which 384 filled the questionnaires correctly. The respondents were those who subscribed to or were members of the news agencies' websites and regularly used the famous general news agencies such as ISNA, IRNA, ILNA, FARS, and MEHR; or those, who used specific-news agencies such as ECONNEWS (economical), IPNA (sport), IBNA (cultural), ITNA (information technology), and SHANA (energy). Hence, the sample of the study consists of users of both the governmental and the non-governmental news agencies. This diversified sample can increase the validity of the results of the study.

Based on the research objective, a questionnaire was prepared to investigate the online brand creation in the Iranian news agencies. The questionnaire was developed based on the research hypotheses. Most items indicating the research constructs were drawn from the previous literature as mentioned in the literature review, which depicts validity of measures. Questions were designed using a five point likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). The final scale consisted of 42 variables in order to capture the five dimensions that comprise the online brand creation. The questionnaire contents and design was pre-tested before the final data collection. Reliability analysis came out to be 0.926 indicating the data to be reliable.

Data Analysis

To analyze the gathered data and test the relationships proposed by the framework of the study, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted. Summary scale statistics and correlations for the measures are reported in Table 1.

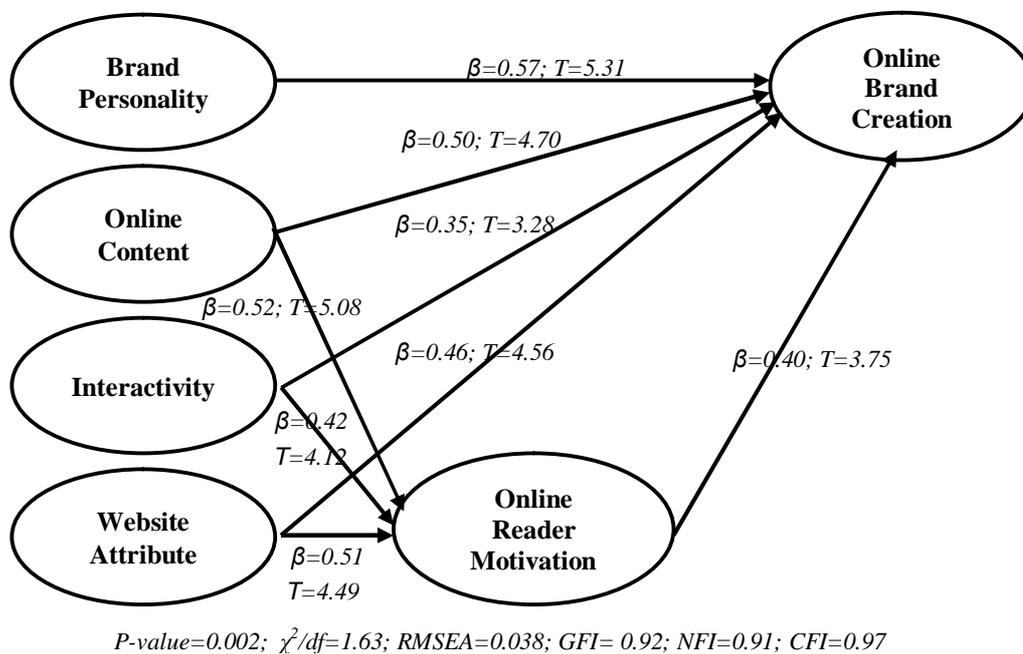
Table 1: Descriptive statistics and construct inter-correlations

		Mean	SD	X ₁	X ₂	X ₃	X ₄	X ₅	X ₆
X ₁	Online Brand Creation	3.86	0.52	1.00					
X ₂	Brand Personality	3.73	0.55	0.78**	1.00				
X ₃	Online Content	3.80	0.88	0.41**	0.36*	1.00			
X ₄	Interactivity	3.47	0.64	0.50**	0.57**	0.49**	1.00		
X ₅	Website Attribute	3.50	0.71	0.48**	0.70**	0.36**	0.38**	1.00	
X ₆	Online Reader Motivation	3.32	0.69	0.69**	0.55**	0.68**	0.50**	0.72**	1.00

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 Two-tailed test.

The scales of the study were refined by deleting the items which did not load meaningfully on the underlying construct, and also the ones which did not highly correlate with other items measuring the same construct. To assess the convergent and discriminant validity of the measures, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used. Through a series of scale purification processes final results of CFA were in the acceptable range ($\chi^2/df = 2.08$; GFI = 0.92; AGFI = 0.90; NFI = 0.93; NNFI = 0.91; CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.041; RMR = 0.08). After the process, all indicators were significantly loaded to a respective construct, providing unidimensionality. Then, the proposed model was tested using the structural equation modeling (SEM) with the LISREL 8.7 software package. Therefore, the model of study exhibits a good explanatory power (P-value < 0.00002; $\chi^2/df = 1.63$; GFI = 0.92; AGFI = 0.90; NFI = 0.91; NNFI = 0.91; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.038; RMR = 0.04).

Figure 2: Beta Coefficient and T-value for the Model of the Study



All of the hypotheses of the study were confirmed. As shown in figure 2, brand personality has a positive direct impact on the online brand creation, and therefore, H₁ supported ($\beta = 0.57$; $T = 5.31$). There were 2 paths which related to the online content construct. Empirical evidences support of both H₂ ($\beta = 0.50$; $T = 4.70$) and H₃ ($\beta = 0.52$; $T = 5.08$). Comparison between H₂ and H₃ revealed that the online content influence online brand-creation more than the online reader motivation. H₄ and H₅, which predict the effects of interactivity were also confirmed; comparison between the obtained results showed that the path between interactivity and online reader motivation ($\beta = 0.42$; $T = 4.12$) was stronger than the path between interactivity and online brand creation ($\beta = 0.35$; $T = 3.28$); Hence, interactivity is a better antecedent for the online reader motivation, rather than the online brand-creation. As predicted, the direction between the website attribute and the online brand creation explained by H₆, was significant and positive ($\beta = 0.46$; $T = 4.56$). The other path from this construct and the online reader motivation by H₇ ($\beta = 0.51$; $T = 4.91$) was also confirmed and was stronger than the previous path. Finally, H₈, which predicted the relationship between online reader motivation and online brand creation, was supported ($\beta = 0.40$; $T = 3.75$). Result obtained of H₈ also confirmed the mediating role of online reader

motivation in the paths from online content, interactivity, and website attributes, toward the online brand creation.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of online brand creation antecedents in the media industry, which were not studied in relevance to Iran. To provide empirical evidence, the study focused on news agencies in Iran and the data were gathered from both the governmental and the non-governmental sources, general or specific ones. Framework of the study proposed a direct relationship between brand personality, online content, interactivity, website attributes, and online reader motivation with the online brand creation. On the other hand, some indirect relationships were proposed which predicted the effects of online content, interactivity, and website attributes on the online reader motivation and then on the online brand creation. Primarily, results supported the goodness-of-fit for the model of the study and confirmed its explanatory power.

According to the results, online brand creation in the media industry is preceded by five components: brand personality, online content, interactivity, website attributes and online reader motivation. Brand personality received the strongest beta coefficient among the five variables, which indicated the importance of news agency's orientation towards the news and the society. Brand personality of the news agencies determined the way it is broadcasted and analyzed. Internet users usually search for the news agencies whose brand personalities are similar to their own individual personalities.. The greater the congruity is between the consistent and distinctive human characteristics of an audience and those of a brand, the greater will be the preference for that brand of news agency. Furthermore, brand personality may also result in audience's trust and loyalty to the news and information that they receive. Online content is also another important determinant of the online brand creation for the news agencies and is described perfectly by how updated, qualified, reliable and rich the content is. Content should be supervised carefully by the news agency's manager; fake or partial news could ruin all of the corporation's attempts to create a brand, and can label the news agency as a dishonest one.

Two constructs, interactivity and website attributes, were also confirmed by results but were not as strong as brand personality and online content. Ease of use, especially the web page loading time and speed, is the most important component of website-attribute construct in Iran. If a news agency's first page is always full of pictures, flash files, and advertisement banners, it will cause a slowdown for the first page to load. News agencies which could manage a higher speed of loading could gain more market share; their revenue from the advertisements will increase because of more incoming visitors and a higher ranking among the news websites. Interactivity received the least attention than the other variables; a possible explanation for this finding is that the Iranian internet users place a higher priority for reliable and honest news rather than for a forum to discuss about the news.

Online reader motivation was the only construct which predicted the online brand creation construct and was also affected by the constructs of online content, interactivity, and website attributes. Beta coefficients for the relationships between the online reader motivation and the online content ($\beta = 0.52$), and the online reader motivation and website attributes ($\beta = 0.51$) were very close, while the interactivity beta coefficient was less than both of them ($\beta = 0.42$). This result could strengthen the proposition made about the Iranian internet users' priorities pertaining to the news agency's websites, and contributes to the understanding of online reader's motivation and behavior. Other valuable conclusion about the online reader motivation is of its mutual role in the relationship among online content, interactivity and website attributes, toward online brand creation. Therefore, the influence of the three

mentioned variables in the media industry is perhaps more than what could be calculated from their direct paths.

Future researches could use the foundations provided by the current study to investigate the brand related topics in the media industry. It may also be worthwhile to carry out research studies with other various internet-based industries, such as e-shops or e-advertising. Geographical contexts can be changed to analyze the differences and similarities between the online news contents.

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