Website Personality: A Theoretical Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a theoretical study of the concept of website personality and its importance to the digital marketingworld. A lot has been written about the different facets of online marketing, a very dynamic field of study. Internet marketing means different things to different stakeholders- for those in web development and technology integration, Internet marketing is concerned with building robust web sites, for the marketers and those in advertising, it is about impact on prospects and customers so as to drive the web-traffic towards the brand/website.But the web site is an important platform for each one of them. But what is it about the web site that is to be considered important from all these perspectives? Do web sites also have a personality?

1. Introduction:

There's a change in the way the online market is operating, in its ways of reaching the consumer, whether it is through a physical store-front, digital device, or otherwise to provide omni-channel presence in retailing. According to the Retail Research Report, 2017 by Retailers Association of India, 65% of the population of India is less than 35 years of age, due to which there is a change in the e-tailing market as the younger generation is more technology-savvy and ready to adapt to new developments.

Over the years a lot of emphasis has been given to Internet / digital marketing, which includes a mechanism to reach the website of the retailer which is the final destination for the customer. But finally it depends on the receptiveness and friendliness of the website, that keeps the customer on site and creates the 'stickiness' necessary till the purchase process gets completed.

1.1 E-Retailing& Online Marketing:

Electronic Retailing or e-Retailing is the concept of selling of retail goods using electronic media, in particular, the Internet. E-Retailers can be pure play businesses like Amazon.com or businesses that have evolved from a legacy business (Reference: e-Retailing Principles & Practice by D.P. Sharma). The website is a base of electronic retailing, requiring it to be sufficiently attractive to magnetize the visitors of the site and to keep them coming back to the website.

Online marketing is a part of electronic commerce. Electronic commerce, or e-commerce covers a whole range of activities such as electronic data interchange, electronic payment systems, order management, information exchange, buying and selling of products or services, and business applications through the electronic medium with electronic documentation. It is business done online. This takes place when a firm connects its business systems to its customers, distributors, vendors, and suppliers via intranets, extranets, and the Internet / Web.

Though online marketing/marketing on the web is a form of direct marketing, it is very powerful in comparison to other forms due to its speed and interactivity. It creates an interaction between the buyer and seller which is very close to real life.

Four main categories of online marketing communication are Websites, search ads, display ads and email. A variety of online communication options would mean that companies could send individualized messages that would engage consumers according to their special interests and behavior.

Web sites must be designed so as to have clarity to the viewer on the purpose that keeps the attention of the visitor and interesting enough so as to encourage repeat visits.

1.2 Website Personality:

People look for unique or pleasant experiences when they deal with businesses or other individuals. Similar is the case with a website. When a user interacts online, they expect comfort, reliability, a human feeling from the product / service. Even if the products / brands being sold by retailers are similar, the ability to create a good in-store experience can play an important role in differentiating a retailer from the competitors. *The image of the retailer in the minds of online customer is created by the retailer's website* –an important brand intangible. Personality is all about user experience. **Understanding the web personality is identifying what kind of user experience is being offered**.

Website visitors base their perception of the site on the looks, ease of understanding (content), ease of navigation and the quickness with which the pages open. Some users judge a site by the number of clicks to get to any page in the site. According to Steve Krug in 'Don't make me think', what really counts is not the number of clicks it takes to get to what the user wants but the amount of thought required, and the amount of uncertainty about having made the right choice with each click. As long as the user has confidence that he / she is on the right track, the number of clicks would not matter.

Online security and privacy protection issues must be taken care of by companies, by introducing automation wherever possible. It has been recommended by researchers that transforming various 'touch points' related to privacy on the web site into a positive customer experience by developing user-centric privacy controls to give customer control, preventing human intervention by using automation whenever possible.

A web site that draws targeted customers, generates the desired behaviour (be it a purchase or otherwise), builds trust and loyalty with these customers, and is invulnerable to competitive marketing actions.

2.   Survey of Literature:

2.1   In the book, 'Site-seeing: A Visual Approach to Web Usability'by Luke Wroblewski, personality has been defined as that that determines how you react and how others react to you. According to the author, personality makes an individual unique, different from others and on the basis of which people identify or remember.Speaking of the website, experiences would define the interaction between the audience and the website. These experiences would comprise of the different components such as presentations, photos, content, and whether each of these collectively make the impact on the viewer which is enjoyable, relaxing, making the audience wanting to surf through. So basically, consistency in the website gives a consistent experience to the visitor. That is what the audience would like to repeat.Visual appeal through presentation reinforces the contribution to the website personality.

2.2   In Designing for Emotion by Aarron Walter, the author makes a mention of adding personality to designing in the 'History Of Personality In Design' and says that we have a history of injecting personality into the things we make, in an effort to add a human touch to mechanical things. The author makes a mention of Johannes Gutenberg, goldsmith

and father of the printing press who was inspired by the human hand.

2.3   In websites, where customers don't see physical presence of a store or salesperson or products, trust is the most important attribute that leads to loyalty. If there is no trust, consumers will move to other sites. This is the outcome of the study by Reichheld and Schefter in Harvard Business Review.

2.4   'Web site customer orientations, Web site quality, and purchase intentions: The role of Web site personality', the authors (Amit Poddar, Naveen Donthu, Yujie Wei) have adapted the concept of brand / store personality to Internet Marketing by investigating the effects of Web site personality on perceived Web site quality and consumer purchase intention. Having knowledge of website personality gives firms an advantage over the competition, according to the research. It is important because it has an effect on various factors- an important one being interaction and associations with customer, which determines their continuity on the site for transactions. The research also states that retailers operating online would have a benefit on studying traits that could affect satisfaction of the customers and how website personality could be manipulated.

2.5   Shobeiri,Mazaheri, and Laroche, in a research paper speak of the increasing competition because of online shopping boom leading to the fact that the website has to be differentiable and engaging from the

others.The authors speak of this in terms of certain dimensions like genuineness, enthusiasm, solidity, sophistication, as personality traits of the website.

2.6   In an exploratory study, researchers Chen, Rodgers gave dimensions for personality of websites as they are influential in formulating consumer behavior and attitudes. In the study, there is a comparative drawn between websites and advertising. The dimensions as suggested by the authors are sincere, organized, fun, candid, intelligent. The study also has a scale developed and validated to measure personality of websites.

2.7   In 'The Impact of Website Personality on Consumers' Initial Trust towards Online Retailing', Leen, Ramayah, Omar,assesshow website personality affects consumers trust for retail sites for online books. From the different personalities studied, competence and sincerity have more influence to determine whether a consumer trusts a retailer operating online on their first visit to the website.

2.8   According to the author NittanaSukasame in 'The Essence Of Online Retailing: A Case Study Of Thailand', technology has brought about a change in information sharing and the way of delivery of product or service. Some important factors according to the study for quality of service online are accessibility, security, reliability, content, responsiveness, self-service .

2.9   In the paper 'A Critical Review of Online Consumers' Purchase

Intentions', the authors Ezgi Ari and V. Aslihan Nasir make a mention of different factors that affect online consumers. The paper identifies the factors, categorizes these factors, basically to study consumers purchase intention and behavior on the basis of empirical studies in the literature. The main categories identified by the authors include

2.9.1 consumer characteristics (general variables- such as trust, perceived risk, attitude towards online purchasing, perceived self-efficacy, purchase satisfaction , personal innovativeness; demographic variables such as education, income, gender, occupation, age, residential area, level of internet usage, culture, online shopping experience, marital status)

2.9.2 Web characteristics as a sales channel (general variables- payment, delivery, advertisements, e-word of mouth, service quality, after sale service quality; relative advantages- saves time, more product alternatives, fast and more convenient, shop anytime and anywhere)

2.9.3 merchant characteristics (reputation of the merchant, perceived marketing mix, brand)

2.9.4 website characteristics (quality of information, reliability, ease, message framing, web atmosphere –design, layout and functionalities and image of the website)

2.9.5 product characteristics (product type, product assortment, social media- opinion leaders)

2.10 The authors Akrimi, Khemakhem have concluded in their research that a highly functional interface should be provided by websites to generate

positive emotions and positive behavior for the future. The website design is an important factor for customers. Ease of use, attractiveness, interactive interface and usability, are some important elements. Besides, it is also suggested that those who want novelty would want some element of sophistication.

2.11 Researchers Eroglu, Machleit, Davis have proposed a conceptual model to study the influence of atmospheric qualities of a virtual store. The environmental characteristics of the virtual / web ''store'' have been grouped into two general categories –

2.11.1 Cues / environment that is highly task relevant- like the merchandise picture, conditions of sale, terms of delivery, return policy, any aids provided for navigation help.

2.11.2 Cues / environment that has low task relevance- such as things associated with the backdrop of the website like colour, font, borders, sound, icons, pictures and decorations.

2.12 The Web is a powerful tool for strengthening relationships, and for success of operations online- e-loyalty is important. The authors Reichheld and Phil Schefter, explain this with the help of examples of Dell Computers, Vanguard, Grainger, eBay which emphasis on retention of customers which is important/ vital for online success. To gain loyalty, the website must gain trust because in the online means, risks and uncertainties are magnified. The authors have supported their article with graphical

representations to support the implication of loyalty on cost.

2.13   In 'Web site satisfaction and purchase intentions – Impact of personality characteristics during initial web site visit', ChaturaRanaweera, Harvir Bansal and Gordon McDougall, say that initial transaction by any consumer is influenced by the web site. Trust, risk and attitude are basic concepts of e-commerce when we speak about experiences with the online medium.

2.14   Whether the site is navigable, the site content, delay in download, interactivity, and responsiveness affect the website success. This has been validated by author Palmer in his research.

2.15   In the research paper 'Dimensions of brand personality' by Jennifer L Aaker, the objective was to develop a framework of brand personality dimensions and a reliable, valid, and generalizable scale to measure the dimensions. The study suggests that consumers perceive that brands have five distinct personality dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness.

2.16   In the Thesis 'Online Brand Personality in Sweden', author Honoria Ambe (Linnaeus University, Sweden) carried out a study to explore Park et al. (2005) online brand personality model in the Sweden context. The study works on the dimensions and traits mentioned in the brand personality model by Park. They are Bold (gaudy, sexy, bold, show-offy), analytical (analytical, objective, accurate,

detailed, realistic, secure), friendly (friendly, warm, gentle, understanding, convenient, accessible), Sophisticated (Sophisticated, liberal, luxurious), Contentment (contentment, time-saving, affordable), Untrustworthy (untrustworthy, disorganized, confusing). These are traits that have been finalized in the study on the basis of the response from the respondents.

2.17   The author Venkatapparao Mummalaneni feels that irrespective of the fact that whether it's a virtual store or a real store, the environment has an influence on behavior of the shoppers. According to a survey of online shoppers, a critical factor for purchase is website design related.

2.18   In the research paper, 'The development of initial trust in an online company by new customers, Marios Koufaris and William Hampton-Sosa state that users do not shopping online because they do not trust the website. The attributes of an e-retailer's website that were the focus of study were perceived usefulness, ease of use, security control and trust propensity.

3.   Literature Review Summary/ Discussion

Author	Website personality / Parameter described	Remark
Luke Wroblewski	Personality makes an individual unique, different from others and on the basis of which people identify or remember. In a website, experiences would comprise of the different components such as presentations, photos, content, and whether each of these collectively make the impact on the viewer which is enjoyable, relaxing, making the audience wanting to surf through.	The book gives an overview of the concept of website personality.
Aarron Walter	The author makes a mention of injecting personality into the things we make, to add a human touch to mechanical things.	The author mentions that if looked at historically, all things designed have been inspired by human personalities.
Shobeiri Saeed, Mazaheri Ebrahim, Laroche Michel	Enthusiasm, sophistication, genuineness, solidity	The study was done on a student sample, which does not represent the general population. The positioning strategy of the e-retailer can help focus on the personality dimension of the website.
ChenQimei, Rodgers Shelly	Intelligent - Proficient (searchable, satisfying), sophisticated (comprehensive, knowledgeable), Effective (easy, competent), Systematic (fast, concise) Fun - Engaging (colorful, attractive), Exciting (flashy, action-packed), Vital (interactive, dynamic) Organized – Confusing (irritating, discouraging), Overwhelming (cluttered, overwhelming) Candid – Orderly, straightforward, simple Sincere – Sincerity, down-to-earth, warm	The study has identified the personality dimensions that could help e-advertisers to better understand the website characteristics and offer improved customer relationship
Jasmine Yeap Ai Leen, T. Ramayah, Azizah Omar	Excitement (contemporary, cool, exciting, trendy, unique), Competence (confidence, intelligent, reliable, secure, technical), Sophistication (charming, glamorous, goodlooking, luxurious, upperclass), Initial trust	There are some factors which are necessary to get the consumer to visit the website of an e-retailer, but trust is essential for a continued relationship of transaction or purchase.
NittanaSukasame	Content, accessibility, ease of use, reliability, responsiveness, security, self-service	The paper is based on a study done in Thailand about the factors important for the success of quality of service and retailing online.

Poddar Amit, Donthu Naveen, WeiYujie	Solidity, Enthusiasm, Genuine, sophisticated, Unpleasant, Site quality, purchase intention, website customer orientation	Website personality factors would provide a competitive edge to the e-retailer in the market place and consumers build associations with websites depending on the behavior and characteristics of the website.
AriEzgi and NasirAslihan	From the website personality perspective, the relevant factors are: Web Characteristics as a channel for sales(general - payment, delivery, quality of service, advertisements, e-word of mouth, after sale service quality; relative advantages- saves time, more product alternatives, fast and more convenient, shop anytime and anywhere) Website characteristics (quality of information, reliability, perception about usefulness, message framing; web atmosphere –design, layout and functionalities and image of the website)	The paper considers the factors affecting online consumers from all perspectives. For website personality, the web related characteristics can be considered as important.
AkrimiYosra, PrKhemakhemRomdhane	The authors have given a lot of emphasis on the website design for usability, interactivity and personality of the website.	The design of the website is equally important to project the right personality to the users.
Chieh-Peng Lin	Perceived imaginative personality, perceived cheerful personality, perceived successful personality, and perceived interactive personality	The study was done on gamers for the online brand personality to identify what would help improve gamer satisfaction.
Jonathan W. Palmer	Delay in downloading, navigability, site content, interactivity, responsiveness	Usability, content and design of web site are important factors for an online retailer.
Honoria Ambe	Bold (gaudy, sexy, bold, show-off), analytical (analytical, objective, accurate, detailed, realistic, secure), friendly (friendly, warm, gentle, understanding, convenient, accessible), Sophisticated (Sophisticated, liberal, luxurious), Contentment (contentment, time-saving, affordable), Untrustworthy (untrustworthy, disorganized, confusing)	This research was focused on current customers who shopped from the specified websites and most respondents with positive feedback. The study could also include the customers who visited the website but did not shop and those having negative perceptions about the website.
MummalaneniVenkatapparao	Website design related factors considered most important. Product representation and ease of ordering	This research findings lay more emphasis on website

	more important; website navigation and looks least important.	design and customer interaction.
MariosKoufaris, William Hampton-Sosa	perceived usefulness, ease of use, security control and trust propensity	The factors mentioned by the authors are important for online vendors.
Sevgin A. Eroglu, Karen A. Machleit, Lenita M. Davis	High task relevant cues - verbal content related to the shopping goals, price, terms of sale, delivery, and return policies, pictures of the merchandise, availability of sampling, and navigation aids e.g., site map, guide bar at top or bottom of page Low task relevant cues - include verbal content, which is unrelated to shopping goals , colors, borders and background patterns, typestyles and fonts, animation, music and sounds, entertainment, icons, image maps, pictures other than the merchandise, indicators of secure connections/ transactions	The cues given by the online retailers are very important elements of study for a retailer's website.
Jennifer L Aaker	Sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness	Brand personality is equivalent to web personality as the website is in itself a brand
Reichheld Frederick F.,Schefter Phil	To gain loyalty, the website must gain trust- a very important factor for success of online operators. Trust over-rules cost and selection for an e-retailing website	Trust and loyalty can be considered as important factors of study for online retailers

4.   Conclusion:

Since most of the researchers have undertaken their studies on students / limited communities/ audience to test their theory, the study could now be done to test the factors being considered important from the above mentioned studies on general consumer community of online purchasers. Besides it would help marketers if they identify which website personality factor is important for furthering their business transactions online and how they could be manipulated.

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