

Emotional and Rational Homepage Content: Separate Dimensions rather than a Continuum

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Abstract

Much of the literature that classifies Webpage content does so in terms of whether it is primarily emotional or rational, i.e., these are ends of a continuum. We argue that emotional and rational Webpage content needs to be studied as distinctive dimensions, where Webpages can include varying degrees of both types of content. This distinction is important because consumers respond to each of the types of content within one Webpage, rather than responding to the Webpage as a single stimulus. In the current paper, this argument is made in the context of Web homepages, or the first page of Websites, because consumers' assessment of the homepage determines if and how they interact with additional pages on the Website.

Keywords: Homepage, emotional content, rational content, dimensionality

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Background

When consumers use the Internet to search for information, they normally go through three distinct stages: search, primacy, and elaboration (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2008). The first stage, i.e., search, involves entering keywords into a search engine, the results of which comprise a list of Websites that contain the keywords in Webpage descriptors (for example, meta tag descriptors). The second stage, i.e., primacy, involves selecting a Website from this list and accessing its homepage, which is the initial consumer Website interface. Consumers then assess whether the content of the homepage meets their requirements, i.e., elaboration. This stage also involves users exploring other pages of the Website that appear to be of interest. If they are not of relevance, consumers return to the search results to find an alternative Website(s) that might meet their information needs (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2008; Wang, Hawk and Tenopir, 2000).

In line with the search stage, an organisation's selection of keywords to use in its Website that align with consumers' search terms is important. Consumers need to be able to locate an organisation's Website before they can choose it and proceed to assess its content. Organisations also need to invest resources into developing the homepage of their Websites because the homepage is the most immediately visible part of the site. It is generally the primary interface between the organisation and potential customers (Nielsen and Tahir, 2002). The importance of the homepage cannot be underestimated. Lindgaard et al. (2006) found that consumers can evaluate the usefulness of a homepage within five milliseconds. Consumers' first impression, as created by the homepage, colours how they perceive the Website, i.e., there is a halo effect from the homepage to the other pages of the site (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2008). A positive first impression can result in consumers overlooking shortcomings of the remainder of the site.

The content of the homepage generally consists of multi-media, such as static pictures, text, video, links, blogs, and sound clips. This content plays an important role in engaging users to explore the Website further (Singh, Dalal and Spear, 2005; Geissler, Zinkham and Watson, 2006; Kim and Fesenmaier, 2008). In response to this homepage content, consumers engage in a complex, but rapid and almost unconscious, evaluation process, which will vary based on the mix of the content (Gladwell, 2005; Lindgaard et al., 2006; Singh et al., 2005; Winter, Saunders and Hart, 2003). Consumers' assessment of the composition of a Website's homepage (i.e., the primacy phase) is considered a vital stage of their Internet search process.

Several studies have been undertaken to understand how a homepage functions as an emotional or rational stimulus to influence consumer responses (see, for example, Singh and Dalal, 1999). A homepage that includes primarily emotional stimuli, either in the form of words or pictures, evokes users' feelings, whereas a homepage that conveys rational stimuli produces cognitive consumer responses (Singh and Dalal, 1999; Dalal, Quible and Wyatt 2000) This paper considers alternative conceptualisations of homepage content: 1) a linear emotional-rational continuum model, and 2) emotional and rational content as distinct and independent dimensions. We review and critique the literature focusing on the categorisation of homepage content as emotional or rational, i.e., the continuum approach, and argue that it

is preferable to treat emotional and rational content as separate dimensions. Finally, the contributions of the paper are presented.

Categorisation of Homepage Stimuli

Early research on Web homepages generally did not seek to categorise their content as emotional or rational (Dholakia and Rego, 1998). Rather, similar to the initial work on the influence of advertising stimuli on users' evaluations, the first studies on homepages adopted a more traditional content assessment approach. This earlier research on Web homepages included exploring the effects of varying content aspects on consumer responses. The content aspects explored included: the number of pictures on the homepage, the presence of sound files, and the number of colours used (Dholakia and Rego, 1998); the presence of banners, colours used, animation, blinking text or images, the number of screens and frames, and the use of photos (Bucy et al., 1999); the amount of animation, graphics and colour (Bruner and Kumar, 2000); and other elements of aesthetic design (Kim, Lee and Choi, 2003).

These types of studies investigating specific homepage features were met with some criticism. Researchers such as Singh, Dalal and Spear (2005) and Hsiao and Chou (2006) argued for a holistic approach to homepage research, as opposed to investigating specific homepage features in isolation and/or in a piecemeal fashion. The call for a holistic approach resulted in the categorisation of Webpage features. This included the development of typologies such as visual complexity versus verbal complexity (Martin, Sherrard and Wentzel 2005), classical aesthetics (clarity of the Website design) versus expressive aesthetics (creativity and richness of the Website design) (Tractinsky et al., 2006); and information quality (content) versus the structure of the interface (e.g., functionality) (Cao and Zhang, 2005). When developing such categorisations, however, researchers often focussed on the context of Websites generally, rather than focussing on homepages specifically.

As the role of the homepage is different to other Webpages within a site, it is important to focus attention on homepages distinctively. Other Webpages within a site are often more task-oriented and interactive (for example, allowing consumers to buy products with a credit card) and the outcome of the interaction is experiential (for example, enjoyment via virtual product experiences) (Oh et al., 2009; Fiore, Kim and Lee, 2005). On the other hand, a homepage is more static, promotional and oriented towards first impressions (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2008; Lindgaard et al., 2006; Russell, 2005). In consumers' search for information, the majority of homepages perform a role similar to advertisements, i.e., of advancing consumers through the hierarchy of effects, and in the case of Websites, facilitating further interaction with the site (Choi, Miracle and Biocca, 2001; Hwang, McMillan and Lee, 2003; Singh and Dalal, 1999).

Several previous studies have tested the role of homepages by examining embedded features that were considered to be either emotional or rational (Lee and Thorson, 2009; Kim et al., 2003; Dalal, Quible and Wyatt, 2000; Singh et al., 2005). Emotional stimuli in a homepage can improve viewers' processing by capturing attention and communicating the sensory attributes of a product, for example, a pleasant image of a picturesque island on a destination homepage (Lee and Thorson, 2009; Singh and Dalal, 1999). Emotional stimuli also involve building a personality for the Website, or creating a superior user image for the Website in an attempt to transmogrify users' self-perceptions by association (Agarwal and Venkatesh,

2002; Chen and Rodgers, 2006). The marketing literature also suggests that emotional stimuli, in general, engender a higher level of consumer recall (Choi and Thorson, 1983; Mehta and Purvis, 2006). Rational information on the homepage, on the other hand, allows consumers to make judgments about the usefulness of the Website (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2008). Researchers have also found that rational stimuli are correlated with consumers' positive attitudes and behavioural intentions toward homepages (Dalal, Quible and Wyatt, 2000; Singh and Dalal, 1999; Singh et al., 2005).

Emotional and Rational Homepages: A Continuum or Separate Dimensions?

Given that homepages consist of emotional and rational content, this led some researchers to place homepages along a continuum, where at one end the homepages consisted of predominantly emotional content, and at the other end were those homepages comprising mainly rational features (Kim et al., 2003; Lee and Thorson, 2009; Singh et al., 2005). Using a continuum approach to classify homepages as being either emotional or rational, however, is criticised in this paper for several reasons.

Firstly, placing a homepage at the emotional end of the continuum implies that there is limited rationality within the page, or it indicates that any rational content is irrelevant. Similarly, a homepage at the rational end of the range suggests that there is restricted, unimportant emotional content within the page. This is the major limitation of the continuum approach. Research by Barrett (2006) and Duncan and Barrett (2007), among others, demonstrate that a highly complex affective and cognitive consumer process is activated in response to emotional and rational stimuli. This means that a stimulus that has been categorised as emotional might still be perceived by consumers as rational, or rational stimuli may be perceived to have some emotional content. For example, a photograph of a brightly lit, colourful and busy city at night that appears on a destination homepage might be used to create a feeling of excitement in consumers. However, it can also be perceived as giving factual information, such as indicating that this city has a variety of entertainment options. Moreover, researchers (see, for example, Bargh, 1997; Ferguson and Bargh, 2003) have refuted the popular notion that consumers' response to an emotional stimulus is automatic, effortless and uncontrollable, whereas the response to a rational stimulus requires mental effort. These studies suggest that the responses to cognitive stimuli can also proceed automatically and effortlessly, and that responses to emotional stimuli can require effort. This is partly because any stimulus can simultaneously activate both an emotional and rational response.

Secondly, a continuum approach led researchers to categorise Websites by product type or purpose. For example, entertainment Websites have been considered to be primarily emotional in content because the products that they are marketing are transformational (i.e., the buying motive is positive-ending, such as sensory gratification) (Rossiter and Bellman, 2005), whereas a site promoting financial services, an informational product (i.e., the buying motive is negatively originated, such as problem removal) (Rossiter and Bellman 2005), is considered to be more rational in its appeal (Harrison, 2008; Lee and Thorson, 2009; Singh et al., 2005). The continuum approach incorrectly assumes that the stimulus (in this case, an entertainment or financial services Website's homepage) is implicitly consistent with the product category. In practice, however, homepage presentation uses a hybrid approach (Huang, 2003; Lai et al., 2009) using both emotional and rational content, regardless of the

nature of the product. Therefore, Websites marketing transformational or informational products generally use both emotional and rational content. For this reason, a continuum can provide only partial information about the homepage.

Thirdly, other research has categorised homepages using the continuum approach based on some overall assessment of which features dominate the homepage. For example, a homepage with more eye-catching pictures than textual information is placed at the emotional end of the continuum, and one with a lot of textual information and limited visuals is placed at the rational end (Singh and Dalal, 1999). The way in which emotional and rational content has been classified has tended to focus on the use of pictures and words, with the former being considered to be more emotional and the latter being seen as more rational in nature (Lee and Thorson, 2009; Singh and Dalal, 1999; Singh et al., 2005;). However, the literature from the fields of marketing communications and consumer psychology presents strong evidence that both pictures and text can evoke emotional and cognitive responses together in consumers (Houwer and Hermans, 1994; Kensinger and Schacter, 2006). A picture can be emotional; its visual attractiveness can capture consumers' affect (Bradley et al., 2001), but it can also be rational insofar as it can convey factual information and may stimulate more cognitive elaboration (Glenberg, Meyer and Lindem, 1987). Similarly, text can be rational and more detached from internal sensory experiences, and focussed on verbal retrieval and encoding (MacInnis and Price, 1987); but it can also be emotional as it can directly express users' feelings and evaluations, and has the power to make a homepage emotional if designed properly. For example, entertaining and creative text can transfer emotion into the homepage to arouse an emotional response in its visitors (Kensinger and Schacter, 2006). As such, each component of stimuli (picture and text) may in fact be more complex, communicating both emotional and rational information to users. This suggests that even a simple overall categorisation does not capture the complexity of what stimuli communicate, but appears to be better suited to focussing on the two dimensions independently.

Finally, a continuum approach does not allow thorough investigation into how different users with different information needs respond to specific types of information within homepages. This is important as individual differences may moderate the effect of Website stimuli on consumers' attitudes and behaviour (Lee and Esther, 2009); favourability toward the product and Website (Sicilia, Ruiz and Munuera, 2005); and brand attitudes, Website attitudes, and purchase intentions (Martin, Sherrard and Wentzel, 2005). Thus, emotional and rational stimuli and their effect on consumer outcomes can be moderated by two specific individual differences, namely Need for Affect (NFA) (Maio and Esses, 2001) and Need for Cognition (NFC) (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982). Individual differences in NFA and NFC are likely to be related to the pursuit of and experience with emotional and rational stimuli. Individuals high in NFA and low in NFC are more sensitive to the presence of emotional stimuli in the homepage; alternatively, individuals with high NFC and low NFA generally prefer to think rationally and rely heavily upon factual information; individuals with high NFA and high NFC are equally comfortable processing both rational and emotional information; and individuals low in NFA and low in NFC inconsistently alternate between their processing styles (Haddock et al., 2008; Huskinson and Haddock, 2004; Sicilia, Ruiz and Munera, 2005; Sojka and Giese, 2006). It might be anticipated that consumers high on one informational need would rely more heavily on the same type of information within homepages. As such, even the minimal use of emotional or rational appeals might be important to consumers who value this information and they might discount the other type of content, even if it were to be prominent in the homepage. With the continuum approach, it is not possible to know the effect of a homepage on users with different needs for affect and cognition because this

approach does not provide the possibility of systematically distinguishing homepages in such a way that they can be matched with these different user types.

Overall, the continuum approach reduces the notion of connectivity between emotional and rational content, suggesting a mutually exclusive proportion of each element, as each is measured along a series. Therefore, a continuum approach cannot predict rational and emotional effects separately. However, research suggests that emotional and rational stimuli act independently of one another (Zajonc, 1980). Therefore, two separate dimensions for rational and emotional homepage content are required to match different independent user types.

Conclusion

Traditionally, homepages have been categorised using a continuum model of emotional to rational stimuli that, as a linear measure, increasingly diminishes the opposite category. The continuum model, therefore, precludes study of the complexity of processing emotional and rational stimuli, as its structure is inadequate to determine commingling responses to homepage content and, therefore, limits research on this phenomenon. These issues become more important given that, in reality, most homepages use a hybrid approach that employs both emotional and rational content in a homepage to varying degrees, regardless of the nature of the organisation and the product that is being marketed. To understand the effect of this hybrid approach on consumers, a continuum can provide only limited information. To overcome this problem, we argue that both independent dimensions of emotional and rational stimuli need to be employed in classifying Websites. This needs to be applied in studies examining consumers' evaluations of and behaviour toward homepages. This approach allows researchers a great deal of freedom in their study designs and leads to greater accuracy. Also, by using this dimensional approach, it is possible to make marketing communication creative decisions in respect to homepages assuming knowledge of the target market's personality-type in respect to NFA and NFC preferences. Future research could also test the moderating role of demographic characteristics, such as gender and age, on consumers' responses towards varying emotional and rational stimuli contained in homepages. For instance, studies outside of the domain of online consumer behaviour indicate that women are more likely than men to feel and recall emotions (Canli et al., 2002), and older consumers show increased liking and recall of emotional advertisements (Williams and Drolet 2005; Drolet, Williams, and Lau-Gesk 2007). It would be interesting to see if these findings hold in the context of Web homepages.

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