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The percentage of U.S. consumers shopping and purchasing through the Internet is growing. The consumer has adapted to using the Internet to purchase products and retailers have profited from this new channel. Although the Internet is becoming an important part of business as well as consumers' daily lives, little is known about how a website provides competitive advantage to a retailer and what makes a website appealing to consumers. In order to address the gap in research that exists regarding why and how consumers identify with online apparel retailers, the purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between website attributes (e.g., perceived attractiveness, informativeness), e-service quality (e.g., efficiency, fulfillment, system availability) and consumer-company identification for online information search and purchase behavior. More specifically, this research examines the links between consumer-company identification, perceived usefulness, and attitude toward a website, and their implications for the behavioral intention of consumers. Behavioral intention includes the consumer's intention to search for information and intention to purchase within the online environment.

Very little research has been done that connects consumer-company identification with information search and purchase behavior of apparel consumers in the online context. Combining elements from Social identity Theory and Technology Acceptance Model, this study proposes a conceptual model that builds on the Technology Acceptance Model and tests a total of seven hypotheses developed based on the key constructs and literature.

Survey data were collected from a convenience sample of 291 students at the

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, based on a pre-selected website (American Eagle: www.ae.com). Structural Equation Modeling was used to test the hypothesized relationships.

Findings revealed that six of the seven hypothesized relationships were supported. This study makes several contributions to the literature. First, this study tests consumer-company identification to provide implications for Internet retailing. Second, the research provides important insights into consumers' search and purchase intentions in relation to consumer-company identification with, perceived usefulness of, and attitude toward a website. Third, discussion of the relationship between website design attributes, e-service quality attributes and perceived usefulness provides suggestions for online marketing strategy. Fourth, this research connects psychological concepts like identity and organization identification with business strategies and consumer decision-making. Finally, this research confirms the unique value of Internet technology to retailing and emphasizes the importance of online store attributes to search and purchase intention.

AN INVESTIGATION OF ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES
OF CONSUMERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD
AN APPAREL WEBSITE

by
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APPROVAL PAGE

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Because these are the days worth living at UNCG

These are the years we're given

And these are the moments and times

You all make the best on my dissertation

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the dissertation and includes the following sections: (1) Statement of the Research Problem; (2) Background Information; (3) Gaps in the Research; (4) Purpose and Objectives; (5) Significance of the Study; (6) Definition of Key Terms; and (7) Organization of the Dissertation.

Statement of the Research Problem

The percentage of U.S. consumers shopping and purchasing through the Internet is growing. To keep pace, Internet marketing has rapidly increased (Levy & Weitz, 2001). A recent report issued by the Department of Commerce indicates that online retail sales in 2008 were \$147.6 billion, and apparel, accessories, footwear and jewelry totaled \$23.2 billion, nearly equal to computer hardware and software sales of \$24 billion. The continuous growth of e-commerce makes it critical for firms to understand consumers' search behavior and design websites that cater to their needs to gain market share (Zhang et al., 2007).

The consumer has adapted to using the Internet to purchase products and retailers have profited from this new channel. O'Donnell and Associates, LLC (2004) indicated that 92% of college students own a computer and 93% have accessed the Internet. More importantly, students' online expenditures exceed that of any other demographic group in the U.S. (Case & King, 2003), thus making for a hypercompetitive market in the race to target online consumers. Although the Internet is becoming an important part of business

as well as consumers' daily lives, little is known about how a website provides competitive advantage to a retailer and what makes a website appealing to consumers.

This research examines what is important to consumers when shopping for apparel online, and in particular, the importance of website design and e-service quality attributes. It can be assumed that a good website design is not only a prerequisite for generating online interest but provides a basis for increasing revenue, in that for thousands of online retailers, earning a profit requires getting the consumer's attention. Consumers are more likely to search a website that is easily navigated than one that is not. Therefore, website attributes play an important role in consumers' online search behavior and intention to purchase (Järveläinen, 2007). That is, retailers must offer an accessible website to get their attention and acquire repeat customers. Indeed, obtaining and retaining the online consumer continues to be a major problem for e-commerce (Seock & Norton, 2008).

This research provides insight into five key issues. First, it examines the antecedents that drive consumers' intention to search information for specific products in specific online stores. Second, it explores what consumers expect when using websites for online shopping and information search. Third, it explores why consumers may or may not purchase through a website. Fourth, it examines website design and e-service quality attributes as strategies website retailers might use to enhance the website's perceived usefulness and develop website consumer-company identification. Finally, it examines the links between consumers' attitude toward a website and their intention to search and purchase products from that website.

Background Information

Internet usage has increased globally over the past several years. According to a Miniwatts Marketing Group (2008) report, the majority of Internet users in 2007 were from Asia (38.7%), followed by Europe (26.4%) and North America (18.0%). As indicated by Figure 1, Internet users come from all areas of the globe.

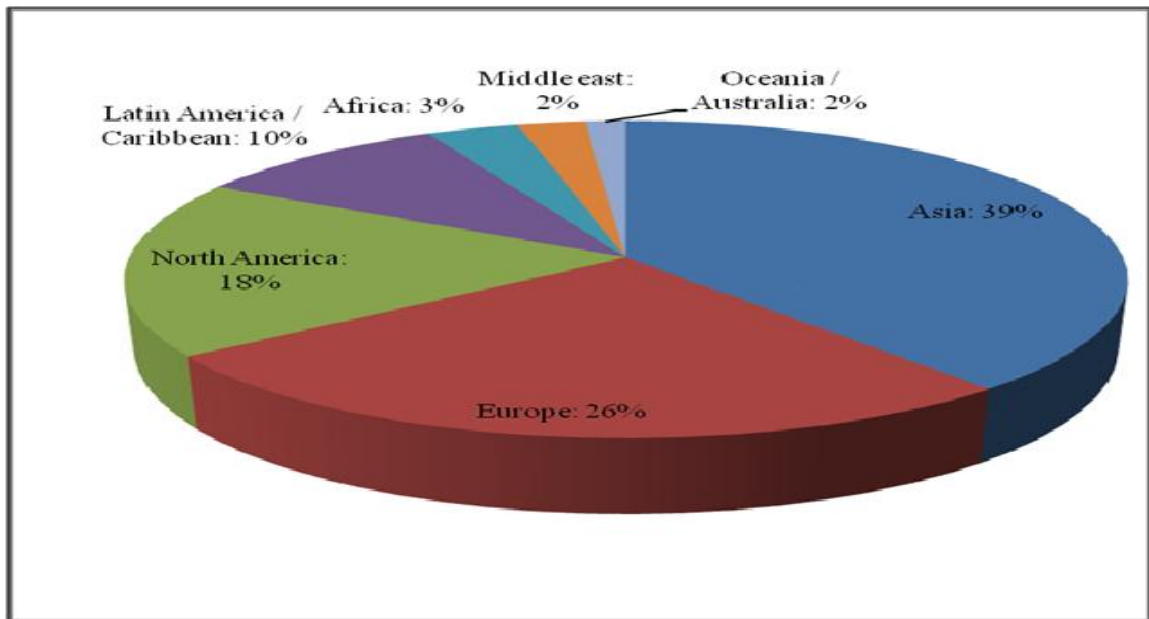


Figure 1: World Internet Users (December 2007)
Source: www.Internetworldstates.com.

As shown in Figure 2, the North American market is the largest of the Americas in terms of Internet usage. This area includes the Caribbean, the United States, Canada, and Mexico. As regards the Asian region, Mainland China has the largest number of Internet users (see Figure 3). This is most likely due to its large population. China is followed by Japan, India, and South Korea. It is interesting that Taiwan's Internet usage is lower than Indonesia and Vietnam, but the results might be different if they were based

on Internet usage ratios of the total population. Clearly, the Internet is a critical site for marketers and retailers looking to establish a global consumer base.

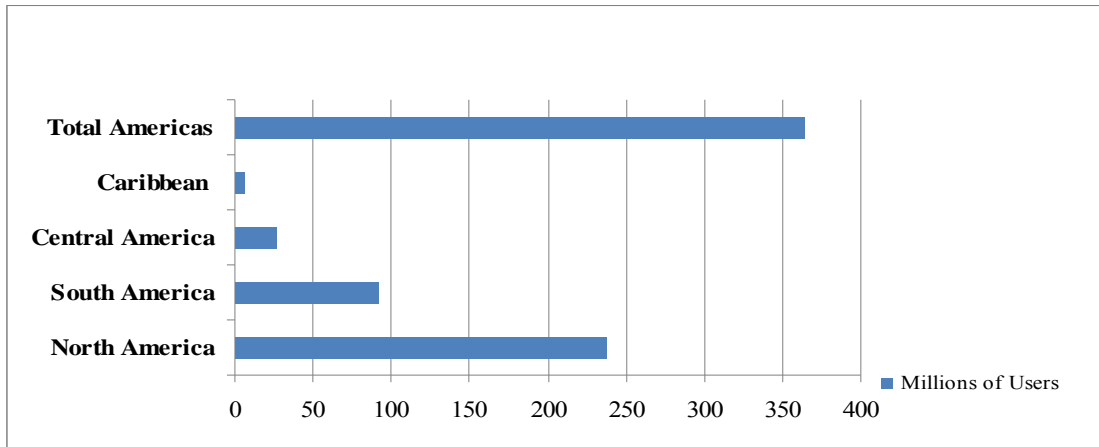


Figure 2: Americas Internet Users (December 2007)

Source: www.Internetworldstates.com.

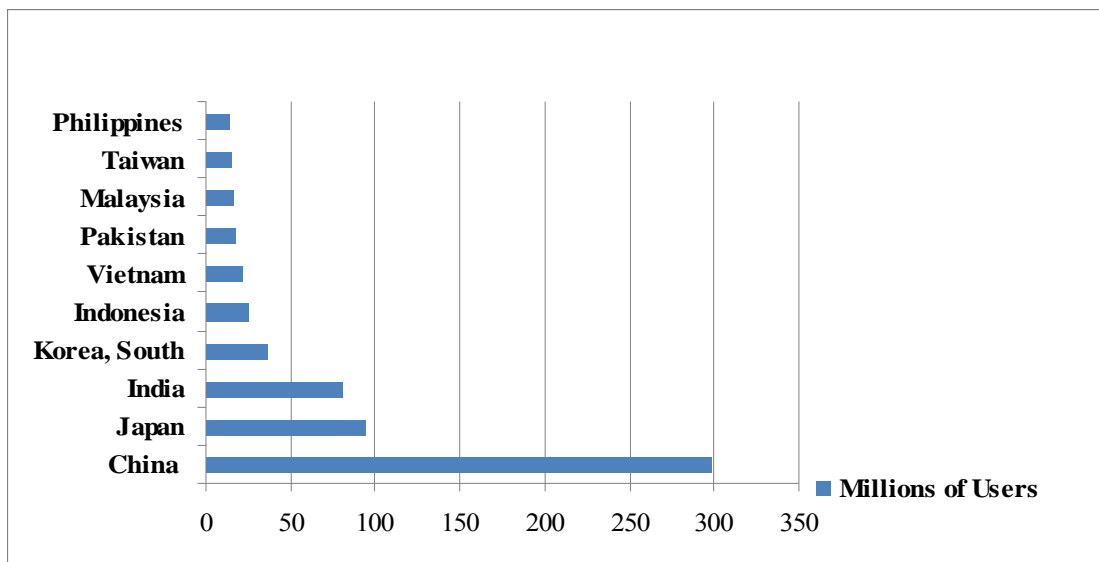


Figure 3: Top Internet Countries in Asia (December 2008)

Source: www.Internetworldstates.com.

Worldwide advertising spending (in millions of dollars) is illustrated in Figure 4.

From 2005 to 2008, television remained the most preferred medium, and newspapers, magazines, and radio advertising spending was greater than Internet spending (see Figure 4). However, use of the Internet for advertising has increased steadily over the past three years, likely due to the greater accessibility of computers and the Internet globally (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2008).

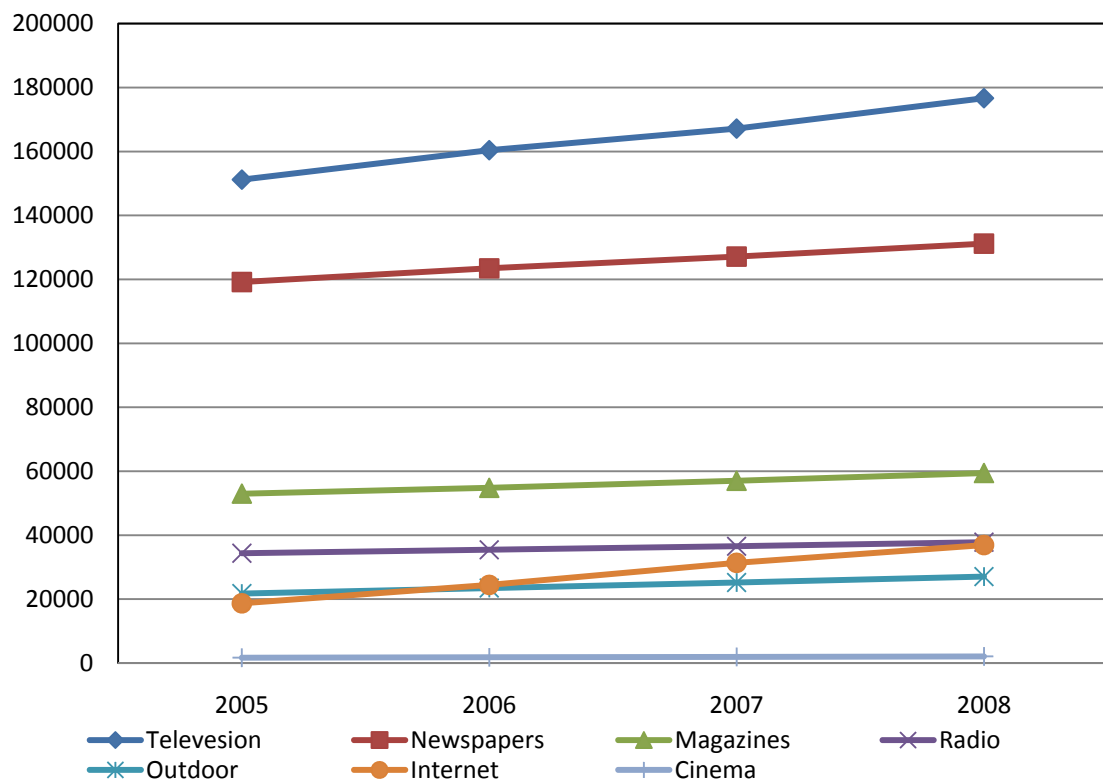


Figure 4: Advertisement Spending Worldwide, by Media (Unit: millions)
Source: www.Internetworldstates.com.

Another way to look at advertising is to compare the percentage of total advertisement spending across media (see Figure 5). While spending on television was the highest, it did not increase over the three-year period of 2005-2008, nor did magazine

advertising. In fact, spending on newspaper advertising decreased during the period. The Internet is the only medium showing a steady increase in spending, suggesting a growing focus on its merits as an advertising vehicle.

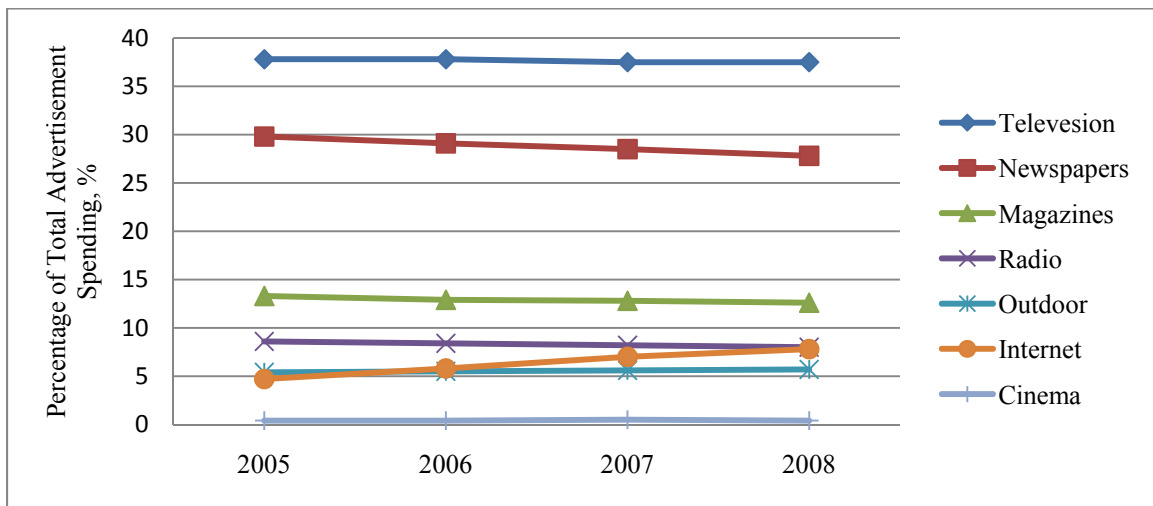


Figure 5: Percentage of Total Advertisement Spending, 2005-2008 (unit: %)
Source: www.emarketer.com.

The business functions of online advertising are changing rapidly. This includes its display and classified functions. Figure 6 indicates that search is the most emphasized function of Internet advertising, and an obvious increase in this trend is seen. This highlights how critical it is to understand the importance of search to online retailing. The key is helping the consumer find your website in a sea of competitors. If a retailer can get the consumer to its site, then it is more likely that the consumer will use it to search and perhaps even purchase. Repeated use of the retailer's site by the consumer for search and purchase could ultimately lead to identification with the site and to establishing loyalty to it.

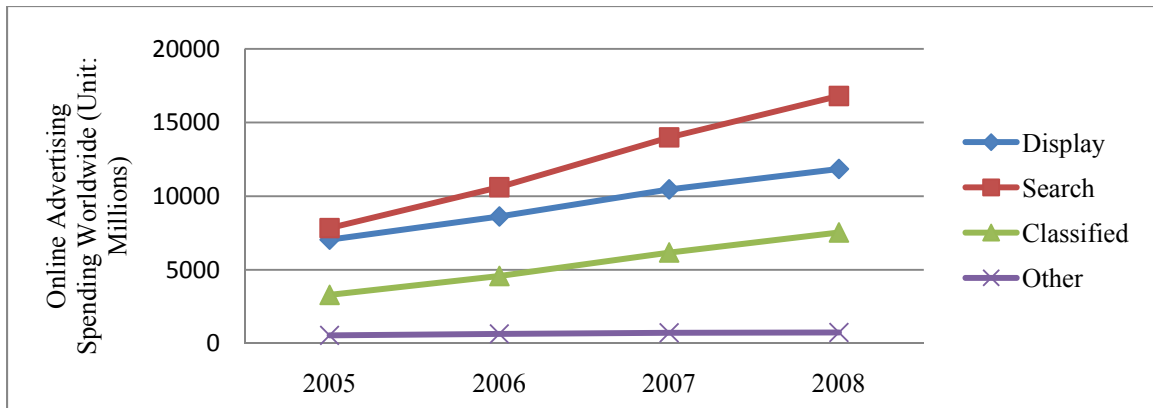


Figure 6: Online Advertising Spending Worldwide, by Type, 2005-2008 (unit: millions)
Source: www.emarketer.com.

Gaps in the Research

Consumers seek products and services that will meet their needs and wants.

Generally, when shopping for products, consumers will compare alternatives using such consideration characteristics as price, service quality, speed, and certainty (Järveläinen, 2007). Consumers have higher commitment to and purchase intention with those products and stores that they recognize and identify with (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Whether consumers identify similarly with products online versus those in the traditional store format is not known. Based on Bhattacharya and Sen's (2003) conceptual framework of consumer-company (C-C) identification, a consumer who identifies with a company will exhibit higher product utilization behavior, greater extra-role behavior (like citizenship) and higher brand awareness (Ahearne et al., 2005). Further, C-C identification may exercise a stronger influence on a consumer's decision-making process than brand image alone. For example, Google.com is often used to locate knowledge or information needed on the Internet. Although there are many online search engines, "Google it" is a common phrase that reflects consumer identification with this particular site. According to

Bhattacharya & Sen (2003), identification occurs when a person's beliefs about some relevant organization become self-referential or self-defining. Connecting an organization's identity to an individual's identity, C-C identification helps individuals to satisfy important self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

Since consumer-company identification is important to the success of retailers' websites, building strong identification is a particularly critical strategy driving website design. Given the multitude of options a consumer has to buy products online, companies must find ways to convince consumers to shop and buy at their particular site. Interaction between consumers' store identification, product identification, and brand image is critical because these factors can lead to greater intention to purchase (Ahearne et al., 2005). Identification with specific websites could also lead to stronger brand loyalty (Homburg et al., 2009). By connecting consumers, stores and brands, consumer-company identification can become a subject of theoretical and empirical relevance to online consumer behavior research.

In this study, C-C identification is seen as the first step toward shaping the image of the store in the consumer's mind, which, according to the Social Identity and C-C identification literature, helps them decide if they will continue in their shopping or searching on a given website (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Brown et al., 2003). Given the thousands of shopping sites on the Internet, it is not difficult for consumers to browse. However, the challenge is to get the consumer to browse your website and develop an identification with it, to make the consumer more likely to revisit the site. Retailers need to help the consumer identify with their online store, and, in turn, to use it to purchase the

product.

Marketing and industry research efforts have been directed toward developing detailed psychological processes to understand how consumers formulate store loyalty (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Each online store has its own look, or personality, features and traits which have been found to influence consumers' motives for and interests in browsing and buying (Brown et al., 2003). For example, consumers' perceptions of a website's convenience are particularly important beyond stimulating their willingness to explore the website for more information (Brown et al., 2003). Consequently, there is a great need for retailers to focus on attributes that can develop website C-C identification.

Research Purposes and Objectives

In order to address the gap in research that exists regarding why and how consumers identify with online apparel retailers, the purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between website attributes (e.g., perceived attractiveness, informativeness), e-service quality (e.g., efficiency, fulfillment, system availability) and consumer-company identification for online information search and purchase behavior. More specifically, this research examines the links between consumer-company identification, perceived usefulness, and attitude toward a website, and their implications for the behavioral intention of consumers. Behavioral intention includes the consumer's intention to search for information and intention to purchase within the online environment. Four primary objectives guide the study:

1. To explore website attributes and e-service quality attributes as antecedents of online consumers' perceptions of a website's usefulness;

2. To examine the relationships among website consumer-company identification, consumers' perceived usefulness of the website and consumers' attitude toward the website;
3. To investigate the relationship between online consumers' attitude toward the website and their intention to search for information; and
4. To determine whether consumers' intention to search for information is related to their intention to purchase an apparel product from the website.

Very little research has been done that connects consumer-company identification with information search and purchase behavior of apparel consumers in either an online or in-store context. Therefore, this research fills a gap in knowledge about the identification-search-purchase process in apparel retailing, and aids in developing a better understanding of the importance of the online channel relative to this process. This study also investigates consumer use of the Internet for information search and how it differs as compared to purchasing. Whether consumers use the Internet to browse, to buy, or to do both, it is important to understand how they connect with a particular website.

Significance of the Study

Given that the online retail channel is now considered to be mainstream, this study contributes to the growing knowledge base about consumers' online shopping behavior. However, by addressing the research objectives, this study explores what is important to consumers' website preferences. It also sheds light on how website design attributes and consumers' expectations of e-service quality influence their perceived usefulness of, consumer-company identification with, and attitude toward a specific

website. In addition, the findings contribute to understanding consumer decision-making behavior with regard to online apparel shopping. Online retailers can apply the results to develop marketing strategies that build consumer-company identification.

This study focuses on college students as they are the most digitally connected demographic group in the U.S. market (Seock & Norton, 2008), and this generation drives our use of technology and innovations. More consumers are getting involved with Internet shopping because it has become mainstreamed. Electronic commerce and online shopping continue to grow as consumers' channel of choice for product and services (Davaraj et al., 2002). More and more Internet users now turn to websites to conduct transactions than ever before (Horrigan & Raini, 2002). Therefore, consumers have more concerns with website attributes like time responsiveness, security, reliability and personalization (Davaraj et al., 2002). The antecedents of channel preference become more important during the purchase stage, yet the key determinants of online channel success are still not very well understood.

By examining C-C identification within the online environment, this study makes several contributions to the literature. First, this study tests C-C identification to provide implications for Internet retailing. Tajfel and Turner (1985) tried to identify the minimal conditions that would lead group members to differentiate themselves from other group members. It could be inferred that a website's language, logos, and slogans could be designed to foster group identification and C-C identification. Second, the research provides important insights into consumers' search and purchase intentions in relation to C-C identification with, perceived usefulness of, and attitude toward a website. Third,

discussion of the relationship between website design attributes, e-service quality attributes and perceived usefulness provides suggestions for online marketing strategy. Fourth, this research connects psychological concepts like identity and organization identification with business strategies and consumer decision-making. Finally, this research confirms the unique value of Internet technology to retailing and emphasizes the importance of online store attributes to search and purchase intention.

Definition of Key Terms

The following table provides definitions of key terms that are applied throughout the dissertation.

Table 1: Definition of Key Terms

Attitude	A person's favorable or unfavorable evaluation, emotional feeling, and action tendencies toward some object or idea (Kotler, 2000).
Attitude to Website	Consumer's perception that a website is interesting and the extent to which they feel comfortable with it (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009).
Consumer-Company Identification	Deep, committed, and meaningful relationships that marketers seek to build with consumers. This identification occurs when a person's beliefs about some relevant organization become self-referential or self-defining. C-C identification is conceptually distinct from consumers' identification with a company's brands and target markets (Bagozzi & Bergami, 2002; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Mael & Ashforth 1992; Pratt, 1998; Scott & Lane, 2000).
Decision-making	The thought process of selecting a logical choice from among the available options. When trying to make a good decision, a

	person must weigh the positives and negatives of each option, and consider all the alternatives. For effective decision-making, a person must be able to forecast the outcome of each option, and based on all these items, determine which option is the best for that particular situation (Kotler, 2000).
Diffusion	Communication of innovation through certain channels over a period of time among the members of a social system (Rogers, 2003).
E-commerce (E-Retailing)	The process of allowing web-based technologies to facilitate commerce or trade. E-commerce can be retail between an e-business and end user, or for business to business transactions (Laudon & Traver, 2003).
Innate innovativeness	Predisposition to buy new and different products and brands rather than remain with previous choices and consumption patterns (Steenkamp et al., 1999).
Intention to Information Search Online	A person's intention to search for relative information about products or services from a website that enables them to act with a degree of confidence (Chen & He, 2003; Suh & Han, 2003).
Intention to Purchase	A person's intention to purchase products or services from a website (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Suh & Han, 2003).
International Marketing	The performance of business activities designed to plan, price, promote, and direct the flow of a company's goods and services to consumers or users in more than one nation for a profit (Laudon & Traver, 2003).
Perceived Usefulness	The belief that using a website will enhance a person's performance during online searching or purchasing (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Järveläinen, 2007).
Segmentation	Assigning potential consumers into homogeneous groups using a set of variables or characteristics (Wedel & Kamakkura, 1998).

Service Efficiency	The ease and speed of accessing and using the website (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Malhotra, 2005).
Service Fulfillment	The extent to which the website's promises about order delivery and item availability are fulfilled (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Malhotra, 2005).
Service-System availability	The correct technical functioning of the website (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Malhotra, 2005).
Website Attributes	Characteristics that indicate a website is attractive and informative (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Heijden, 2003; Skadberg & Kimmel, 2004). These attributes can include a website's visual style and informativeness.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter I outlined the research study. The research purpose and objectives were included, as well as a discussion of the significance of the study. Key terms were also defined. Chapter II provides a review of the literature related to the purpose of the study. Research on Internet use is explored as well as studies that examine search and purchase intention. A review of theoretical frameworks used in previous research to examine consumer identification, information search behavior, and purchase intention in the online environment is also included. Hypotheses are developed based on the literature and relative to the objectives of the study.

Chapter III describes the methodological approach that is used to test the research hypotheses. This chapter includes justification of the sample, description of the data collection procedures, and the process of instrument development. Basic assumptions of

the study are presented. Finally, statistical procedures used during data analysis are outlined.

Chapter IV provides an analysis of the survey data, including a sample description and measurement model analysis. Hypotheses were tested based on the structural model. Chapter V discusses the findings and implications for future research are explored.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter provides a review of literature pertinent to the study, and includes the following sections: (1) Theoretical Foundation; (2) Online Retailing; (3) The Internet and Behavioral Intention; (4) Conceptual Model; and (5) Summary.

The purpose of this research is to investigate relationships between website consumer-company identification and behavioral intention. As consumers realize the additional value of purchasing online, sales in traditional channels have been enhanced by electronic channels. For example, well-known brands such as Gap (www.gap.com), Office Depot (www.officedepot.com), and Walmart (www.walmart.com) are leveraging their existing supply chains and consumer purchasing power to compete online. Due to the increasing number of consumers shopping online, this is placing pressure on click-only Internet businesses like Amazon.com (Wilson, 1998). To succeed, online retailers need to identify and target appropriate consumer groups, provide high quality service and/or products, and emphasize the attributes, such as service or product mix, that make their sites unique and therefore valuable to the consumer.

According to Klein (1998), service speed and a satisfactory experience are more important than price when a consumer shops online. It is believed that successful service means delivering responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and reliability (Yang & Jun, 2008). In fact, service is mostly about relationships. Traditional retailing attempts to build relationships with consumers by increasing mutual loyalty and commitment. Consumers

expect good prices, but price may not be the most critical way to build consumer loyalty. Loyalty increases when consumers associate a high level of value with a store or product (Chang et al., 2009), and websites can contribute to their perception of value. Providing a consistently good website can thus translate into loyalty.

In electronic marketing, website loyalty is based on service as well as product performance (Parasuraman et al., 2005). If the service experience is consistently well executed, then the service provider will create a “bond” with the customer that the customer might value as much as the service itself. The consumer might then begin to identify with the store, and once this happens, the store will be identified easily by the consumer who differentiates the store’s values from that of its competitors (Klein, 1998).

As an electronic marketing channel, the Internet is quite capable of replacing conventional distribution channels when it comes to communicating information and conducting transactions (Webb, 2002). However, there are many websites and online stores to choose from. Therefore, good website design and service are necessary to get the consumers’ attention and begin the identification process. Traditional retailers, as well as click-only Internet retailers (retailers that exist only online), must appeal to consumers who are searching for information, comparing prices, and discussing product information online.

Theoretical Foundation

This section introduces the theoretical foundation for the study. Included is a discussion of Social Identity Theory, consumer-company identification, and the importance of both for examining the perceived usefulness of a website and a consumer’s

attitude toward it.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1985 to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. Tajfel and Turner (1985) tried to identify the minimal conditions that would lead members of one group to differentiate between outside groups. According to Social Identity Theory, a person does not have only one “personal self” but several selves that correspond to widening circles of group membership (Tajfel et al., 1971). A consumer has his or her preferences that represent the “personal self.” Different social contexts may trigger a consumer’s thinking, feeling, and acting on the basis of his personal, family, or national “level of self” (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Moreover, apart from the “level of self,” an individual consumer might have multiple “social identities.”

Social identity is the individual’s self-concept derived from perceived membership in social groups (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). In other words, it is an individual-based perception of what defines the “us” associated with any internalized group membership. This can be distinguished from the notion of personal identity, which refers to self-knowledge that derives from the individual’s unique attributes. To distinguish themselves from other people based on these self attributes, consumers shop at stores that match their unique attributes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

Social Identity Theory asserts that group membership actually creates in-group/self-categorization among consumers and drives them to be more favorable toward in-group members than out-group members. Tajfel and Turner (1987) found that

when individuals were perceived as having group membership, they sought to increase self-esteem by positively differentiating their in-group as compared with an out-group on some value dimension. This search for positive distinctiveness indicates that an individual's sense of who they are is defined in terms of "we" more so than "I."

Tajfel and Turner (1985) identified three important variables that contribute to in-group favoritism: (a) the extent to which individuals identify with an in-group to internalize that group membership as an aspect of their self-concept; (b) the extent to which the prevailing context provides grounds for comparison between groups; and (c) the perceived relevance of the comparison group, which itself will be shaped by the relative and absolute status of the in-group (p. 8). Individuals are likely to display favoritism when an in-group is central to their self-definition.

Social Identity Theory has had a considerable impact on social psychology. It has been tested within a range of fields and topics such as prejudice, stereotyping, negotiation and language use. It has also been applied in organizational behavior research and is particularly useful when related to organizational identity (Bagozzi & Bergami, 2002). The concept of seeing and distinguishing ourselves as different from others in terms of social identity is important in that identification with an organization is more likely when social cues are communicated visually (Walther & Tidwell, 1995).

In computer-mediated communication studies of purchase decisions, social cues were used to form different impressions that distinguish a person from others within the same group (Walther & Tidwell, 1995). Respondents were more interested in others who provide the same social cues, and had positive perceptions of people or organizations

displaying similar cues and identities. Most marketing strategies seek to motivate consumer recognition based on social cues. Therefore, social cues via a website could motivate the consumer to identify with it (Bonabeau, 2004). In this research, Social Identity Theory will be explored for its relevance to understanding consumer behavior, and specifically how it factors into consumers' identification with companies.

Consumer-Company Identification

According to Social Identity Theory, some relationships are based on a consumer's identification with a specific company, and in particular, one that assists him or her in satisfying self-definitional needs. This identification stems from a consumer's active and volitional decision to engage in behaviors related to that company (e.g., shop there) to decide if they favor the company or not (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Individuals often favor organizations that also enhance their social identity. For example, a Harley-Davidson motorcycle permits a consumer to identify with a brand and a company. Social Identity Theory articulates that our sense of self typically extends beyond our personal identity, to shape our social identity (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1985).

Ashforth and Mael (1989) first connected the relationship between an organization's role and social identity by conceiving of the person-organization relationship as "organization identity." Organization identification happens when people believe there to be self-referential or self-defining elements relative to an organization (Pratt, 1998). Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) further isolated organization identification not only from its evaluative and emotional consequences, but also as part of the self-categorization process. According to Kramer (1991), consumers often self-categorize

based on various social categories and perceive strong ties with these categories (e.g., gender, ethnicity, occupation, religion, sport teams). Self-categorization is fundamental to the identity construction process (i.e., “who am I?”) through the comparison of one’s own defining characteristics (e.g., personality traits, values, demographics) with those of others (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994).

Brewer (1991) indicates that people do not necessarily need strong interpersonal or formal relationship ties or interaction to perceive themselves as members of a group. In other words, you can still purchase Gap apparel even if you are not a Gap employee. That means people can experience organization identification even if they are not formal organization members (Ahearne et al., 2005; Pratt, 1998; Scott & Lane, 2000).

Today, business strategy research seeks to further determine why and under what circumstances consumers develop meaningful relationships with specific companies. Marketers make efforts to sustain these relationships through consumer equity and intimacy (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). To achieve this, companies must satisfy consumers’ needs relative to their social identity. Companies must communicate images relevant to the consumer. In turn, consumer-company identification distinguishes among potential segments in the target market (Aaker, 1997).

Components of Consumer-Company Identification

What is consumer-company identification comprised of? There are several perspectives emerging from different research studies. In general, a company’s image stems from the consumer’s perception and beliefs about the company’s characteristics such as culture, value, market position, and product offerings (Brown & Dacin, 1997;

Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Consumers' reactions to the company, such as company-related moods, emotions, and cognitive evaluation are also included (Dowling, 1986). Thus, a consumer's identification is based on whether their own characteristics match those that they perceive the company to have (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Dutton et al., 1994).

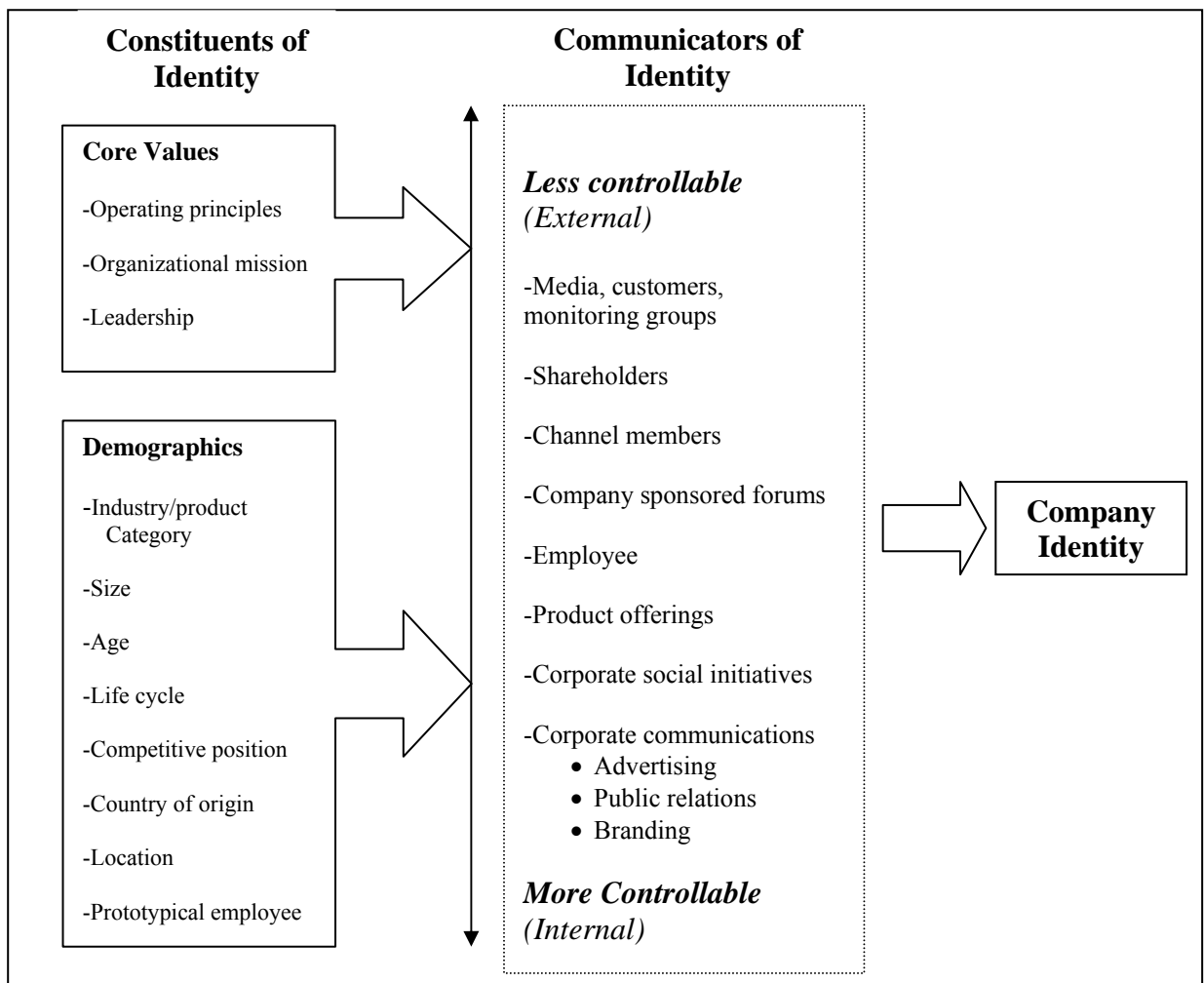


Figure 7: The Constituents and Communicators of Company Identity
 From: Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003. Consumer-company identification: A framework for understanding consumers' relationship with companies. *Journal of Marketing*, 67, 76-88 (p. 78).

Figure 7 illustrates how a company's identity is conveyed to consumers through different communicators (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). For example, a company's identity can be disseminated through official news, annual reports, and its website. Consumers can also acquire information about a company's identity from its logos, signs and symbols. Internal communicators of identity (e.g., advertising, product offerings, and corporate social initiatives) are more easily controlled by internal communicators of identity (e.g., corporate communications) than external (e.g., media, monitoring groups). Similarly, a company can exercise greater control over communicators of its identity through members of its value chain (e.g., channel members, employees) than by people who are not part of its value chain (e.g., shareholders, monitoring groups). There are also constituents of company identity (e.g., core values, demographics) which help to determine its identity.

Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) proposed the Consumer-Company (C-C) framework to connect company identity to consumer-company identification (see Figure 8). This framework includes two sequential relationships. The first relationship is that between perceived company identity and identity attractiveness.

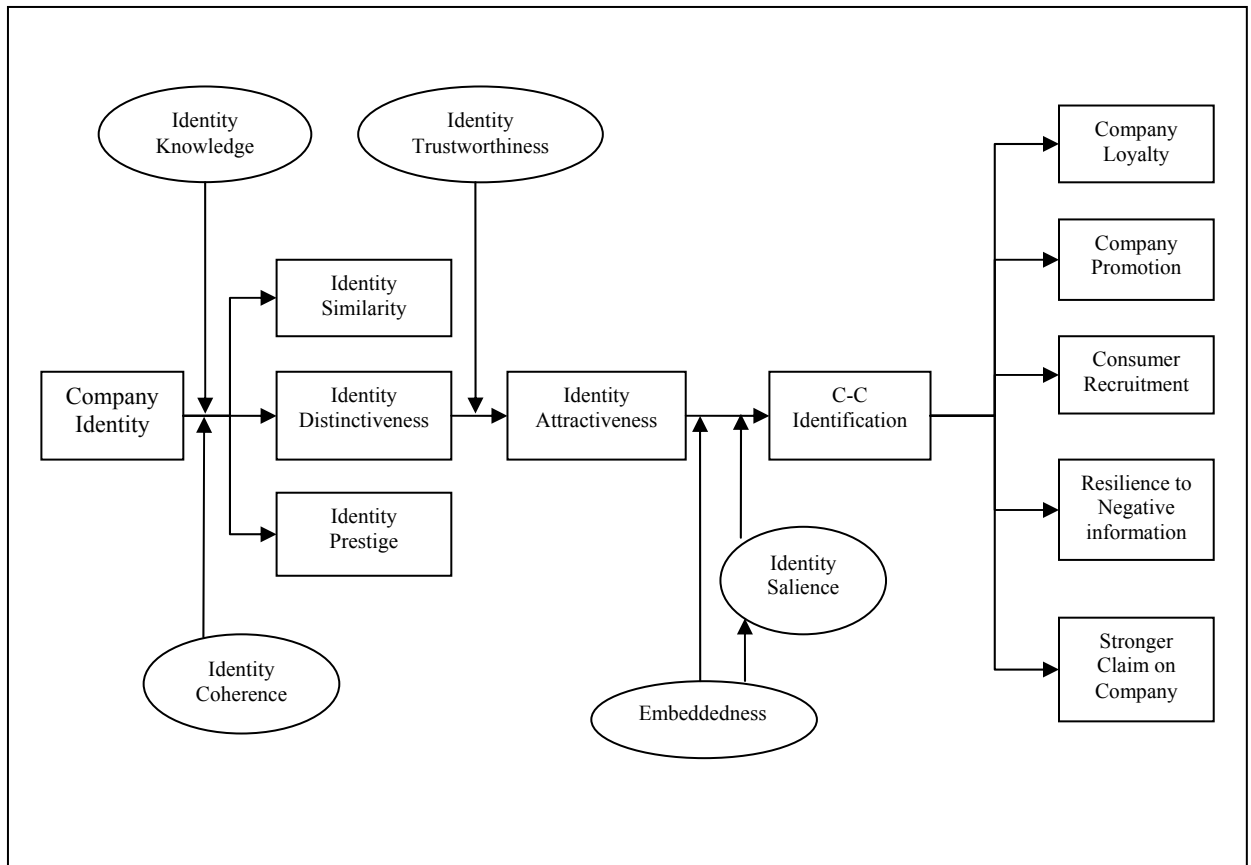


Figure 8: Consumer-Company Identification Conceptual Framework

From: Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003. Consumer-company identification: A framework for understanding consumers' relationship with companies. *Journal of Marketing* 67, 76-88 (p. 79).

The second focuses on the link between identity attractiveness and C-C identification resulting in key consequences (e.g., company loyalty, company promotion, customer recruitment, resilience to negative information, and stronger claim on company).

One of the components leading to a customer's identification with a company is the perceived favorability of that company's central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Besides several self identity principles such as identity attractiveness, prestige, and self-categorization (Bagozzi & Bergami, 2002;

Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Scott & Lane 2000), consumers also seek organizations that meet their self-definitional needs. Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) indicated that C-C identification is based on the extent to which a consumer perceives that a company's identity helps to satisfy at least one of the three basic self-definitional needs: self-distinctiveness, self-continuity, and self-enhancement.

Because consumers seek to distinguish themselves from others in social contexts (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), distinctive company characteristics (e.g., brand, culture, and strategy) can make the company an attractive target for C-C identification. A favorable perception of a company is likely to lead to stronger C-C identification with that company. Consumers' need for self-continuity indicates that in an attempt to understand themselves and their social networks, people are motivated to maintain a consistent sense of self (Kunda, 1999). C-C identification can occur when the company's identity is consistent with consumers' sense of self. When a person's self-concept is enhanced by the characteristics that define the organization, the individual is more likely to connect to the organization because it provides opportunities for their self expression (Shamir, 1991). This self-concept enhancement, in turn, leads to a closer relationship between the individual and organization. These three principles of self-definition account for the favorability of a company's perceived characteristics and thus explain why a consumer may identify with it (Dutton et al., 1994).

Identity Attractiveness

The attractiveness of a company's identity is likely to be based on three factors. First, the similarity of the company identity to the consumer's own identity (e.g., identity

similarity). Second, the distinctiveness of its traits (e.g., identity distinctiveness). Third, the prestige of the company and its product (e.g., identity prestige). Strong C-C identification occurs when there is overlap between a consumer's idea about who he or she is as a person and what he or she stands for (i.e., self image) and who the company is and what it stands for (i.e., the company's image).

The degree to which consumers believe in the company's identity factors into identity attractiveness. Consumers are more likely to make judgments of similarity, distinctiveness, and prestige when they believe they know the company's identity well (e.g., identity knowledge and identity coherence as key moderators). Research on the effects of knowledge on information use and decision-making (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000; Raju et al., 1995) as "identity knowledge," suggests that consumers apply identity perceptions as input into evaluations of company familiarity, prestige, and distinctiveness. Higher subjective knowledge (i.e., a consumer's perception of how knowledgeable he is) of a company's identity is likely to increase the consumer's confidence in their ability to make identity-based evaluations. For example, a consumer might be familiar with the identity of a company by actively engaging in identity communication (e.g., acknowledging a company advertisement) or word of mouth (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Similarly, consumers will evaluate an identity higher when it is perceived as trustworthy. Identity trustworthiness is thus a moderator of identity attractiveness.

Once identity attractiveness is defined, then the link between identity attractiveness and C-C identification, and its key consequences, becomes the focus. Research indicates that C-C identification is stronger among formal members, such as

employees to their company and students to their school (Dutton et al., 1994). Consumer identification based on interactions with brand, company reputation, and product/service leads to embeddedness. This embeddedness draws consumers into the company's network and increases the salience of the company's identity to the consumer (Rao et al., 2000). Embeddedness and salience increase the possibility of C-C identification (Pratt, 1998).

Consequences of Consumer-Company Identification

The C-C identification framework identifies several positive consequences (e.g., company loyalty, company promotion, consumer recruitment, resilience to negative information, and stronger claim on company). For example, consumers in a C-C relationship show a higher resilience when exposed to negative information about the company because of their existing confidence in the company's reputation and product. Moreover, C-C identification allows marketers to predict consumers' purchase orientation because they have classified consumers accurately and can target their needs and desires (Seock & Chen, 2007). Consumers can be assumed to identify with a store or its brands based on C-C identification.

Since people can identify with companies regardless of whether they have contact with specific members (Turner, 1982), identification can be derived from a symbolic group or social category (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). For example, identifying Levono.com with professional products, or Banana Republic as business casual dress. This means that identification is not totally deterministic (Schlenker, 1986; Turner, 1982) and consumers can still choose and negotiate identification by their own free will (Swann,

1987).

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) indicate that C-C identification may not occur in all situations, but is more likely to manifest itself under a set of contingent conditions. First, consumers must think that the product or service is important enough to make the company important. Second, identification is more likely to happen when a consumer perceives that there is a similarity between the company and their self-distinctiveness (Bartel, 2001). Third, consumers are more likely to identify with the company when it is embedded through frequent interaction, such as browsing and purchasing. Granderoetter (1985) and Rao, Davis and Ward (2000) indicate that a consumer feels like an insider when he or she has embedded relationships.

To link C-C identification to actual behavior, Ahearne et al. (2005) developed the organization identification model (see Figure 9). Antecedents of C-C identification include the construed external image of company, the company's boundary-spanning agents (such as salespeople or tech support people) and perceptions of the company. Context characteristics such as frequency of interaction and product use, along with distinctiveness of the company, contribute to C-C identification. Consequences of C-C identification include extra-role behavior, such as membership, and in-role behavior, like purchasing. This research examines C-C identification as applied to online search and purchase behavior and therefore how C-C identification is related to consumer's in-role behaviors.

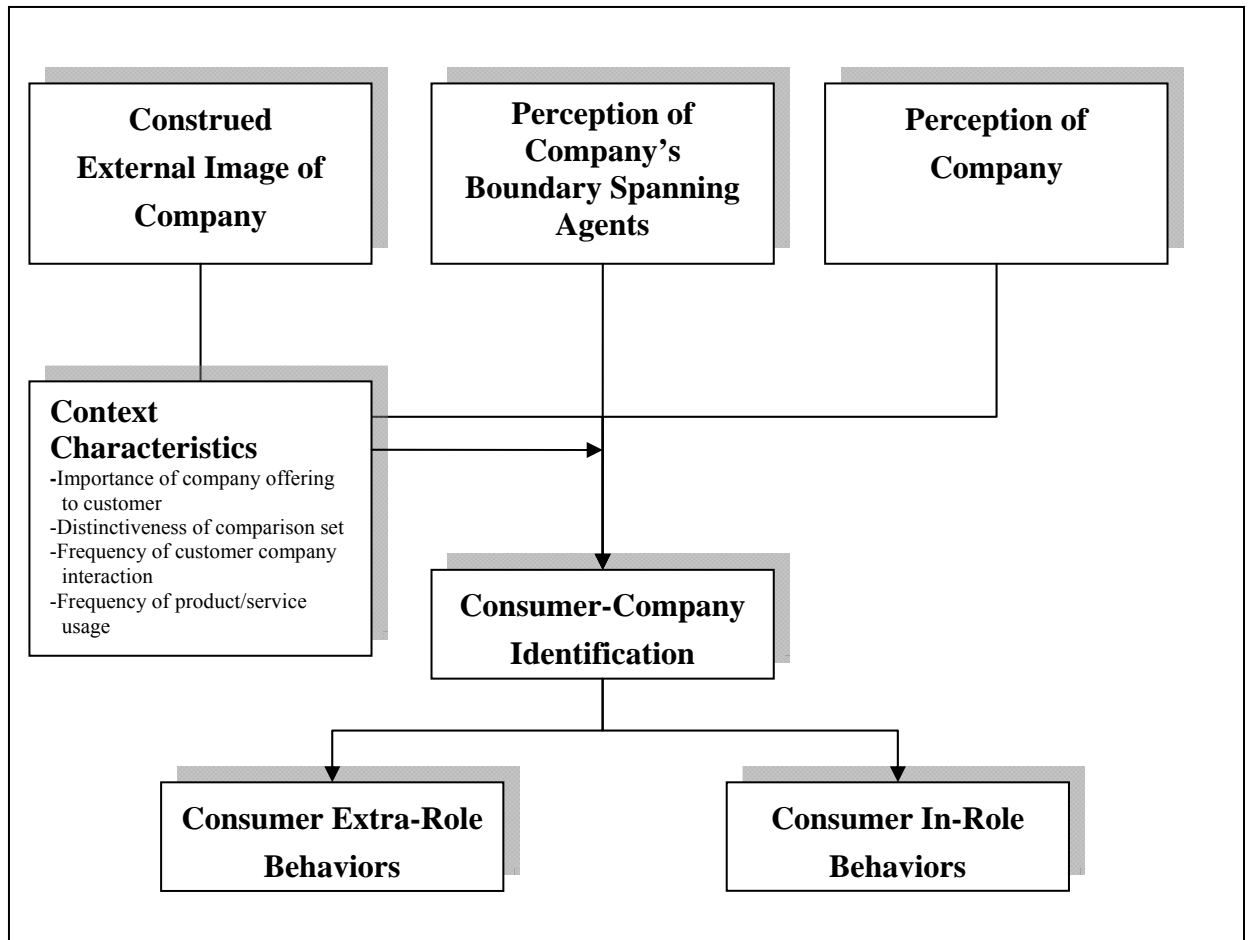


Figure 9: Organizational Identification

From: Ahearne, M., Bhattacharya, C. B., & Gruen, T. (2005). Antecedents and consequences of customer-company identification: Expanding the role of relationship marketing. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(3), 574-585 (p. 575).

Online Retailing

The Internet has become a major retail channel (Reda, 2002). As technology develops, consumers become more comfortable with online shopping and e-retailers continue to optimize their website performance and marketing strategies (Greenspan, 2003). Better website performance and marketing strategies can enhance consumers' experiences with visiting online stores, and, in turn, increase store profits. The online

retail environment has become more competitive as retailers have sought to meet consumers' increasing demand that e-retailers offer service quality, functional website design, and reasonable prices (Parasuraman et al., 2005).

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Davis (1989), is widely used to predict the degree of consumer technology acceptance and for diagnosing technical design problems. The TAM model (see Figure 10) adopts the causal chain of beliefs → attitude → intention → behavior that was previously put forward by social psychologists in the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) shown in Figure 11. Two constructs define the TAM: *Perceived Usefulness* and *Perceived Ease of Use*. Perceived Usefulness is defined as the degree to which consumers feel a system's functions can assist his or her performance. Perceived Ease of Use is defined as the consumer's perception of how free from difficulty a system's function will be (Davis, 1989). Numerous researchers have discovered that the TAM consistently explains many of the reasons that users accept or reject technical systems (Chen & Wells, 1999; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Song & Zinkhan, 2003).

Perception of Ease of Use

According to Davis (1989), efficiency and time-savings increase a consumer's perception of a technology's ease of use. For the Internet, this means easy order placement, a convenient payment system and short delivery times. Consumer perception of ease-of-use can be associated with enjoyment and playfulness, which means the easier the system is to use, the more enjoyable it is. Perceived ease of use becomes an

intrinsically entertaining experience which stimulates consumers to continue use of a website (Skadberg & Kimmel, 2004). By increasing consumer's perception of usefulness, a website's ease of use is important if marketers want to motivate consumers who are not familiar with computers or might have higher avoidance behavior relative to searching for product information through the Internet.

Perceived Usefulness

Perceived Usefulness is defined as the degree to which consumers feel that a system's function can assist his or her performance when operating the technical system. According to the TAM (see Figure 10), consumer perceptions of ease of use eventually lead to perceived usefulness. Therefore, perceived usefulness is critical to how consumers formulate attitudes toward a technical system (Davis, 1989).

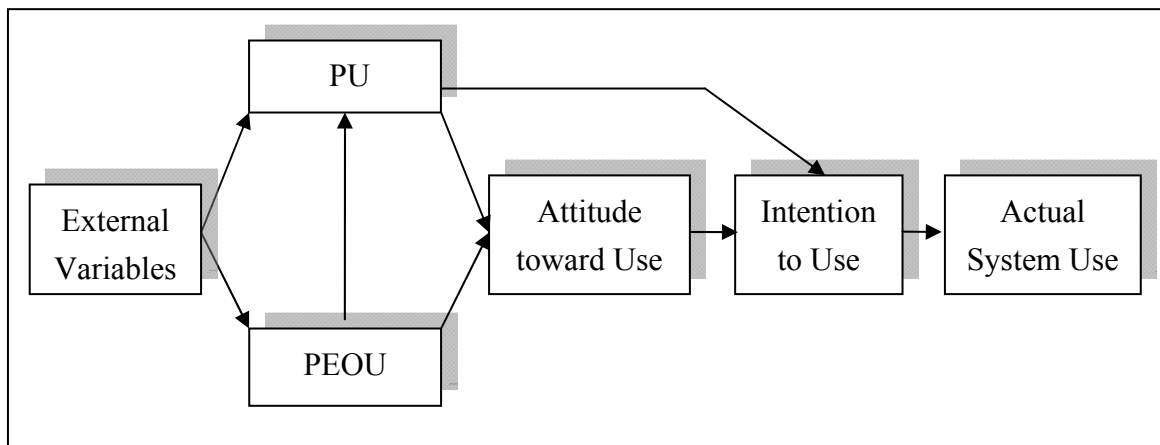


Figure 10: Technology Acceptance Model
From: Davis, F. D. (1989). Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and user acceptance of information technology. *MIS Quarterly*, 13(3), 319-340.

Based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), TAM factors the extent to which a consumer's intention is based on certain beliefs and evaluations which shape their attitude toward a particular object (see Figure 11). Normative beliefs and motivations that stem from the external environment (e.g., social norms, cultural differences, and value expectation) formulate consumers' subjective norm. The psychological output from an attitude toward a behavior and subjective norm composes intentions and eventual behavior. Consequently, TRA provides a logical explanation for purchasing behavior.

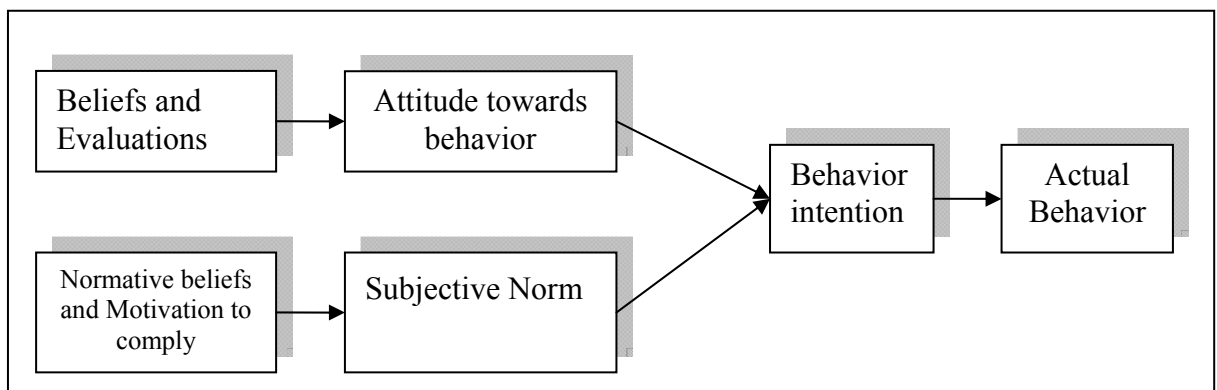


Figure 11: Theory of Reasoned Action Model
 From: Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention and behavior: An introduction to theory and research*. Don Mills, Ontario: Addison-Wesley.

Both the TAM and TRA have frequently been applied in research on online behavior, indicating the direct and positive relationship between consumer attitude and behavioral intention, including purchase intention (Chen & Wells, 1999; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009). Research indicates that perceived usefulness and ease of use are correlated significantly with self-reported (Davis, 1989) and actual usage (Szajna, 1996) of technology. Therefore, the TAM plays a critical role in examining whether consumers are

comfortable with using Internet technology to purchase goods.

Once adoption of the technology has occurred, then the key becomes helping consumers use a specific website. Consumers develop brand loyalty through positive experiences with a product (Lapierre, 2000). The same could be said for a website consumer, who can be loyal to specific sites such as Amazon.com, Yahoo.com, or Google.com. These are websites that have strong brand identity which contribute to a consumer's identification with and consistent use of them (Cao et al., 2005). But website design and service quality are also critical to facilitating the consumer's experience online. According to Cao et al. (2005), attributes of a website's design include its features, functions, user complexity, as well as aesthetic functions like color and sound. Consumers want to easily navigate a website and to access clear images and text about the products offered.

Low prices and strong website presence were initially thought to be the key drivers of website use, however, service quality issues have been found to be pivotal when there are several online competitors (Parasuraman et al., 2005). Because product quality is not assessed until the product is received, consumers often hesitate to purchase online. On-time product delivery or e-mail confirmations can sometimes alleviate consumers' uncertainty and ensure service quality (Parasuraman et al., 2005). Overcoming consumer fears and uncertainty about purchasing products and services through the Internet is critical for e-commerce. Moreover, consumers will not purchase if they think a product is of inferior quality (Simonson, 1988). For apparel purchasing, consumers select products based on a prior experience with that product, and pay

attention to a company's identity when formulating their "evoked set" of considerations when choosing a product (Evanschitzky & Woisetschläger, 2008). Perception of brand helps consumers to eliminate the products they do not want and to identify those that they do.

Online retailers are seeking to expand offerings and provide alternatives that will capture consumers (Parasuraman et al., 2005). For example, companies such as Amazon.com distribute products solely through the online channel but have also shaped themselves into information sources for the consumer regarding their products (e.g., books, computer, or CDs), or links to websites where consumers can go to search for other products (e.g., apparel retailers such as GAP, JCrew, and Banana Republic). Therefore, consumer-company identification becomes critical to evoke a consumer's memory of a company and to use the company's website for both search and purchase.

A consumer's prior purchase experience helps to increase his or her product knowledge, which can strengthen his or her intention to use a specific website. Websites may be used to acquire product information, such as dealsea.com, which provides information on daily sales rather than products for purchase. This kind of product knowledge is especially important when the consumer plans to purchase high price and high involvement products, such as luxury apparel, vehicles, and high tech products. In fashion product shopping, product type, involvement or switching costs also influences consumer purchasing (Kyoung et al., 2008). Consumers will put forth more effort to research a high price and high involvement product to assist in their decision-making during the purchasing process (Simonson, 1988).

As the online channel has become more accepted, companies have had to shift their focus from making e-commerce business transactions to providing e-service quality. In turn, companies have had to shape their identities around this new focus, as it has become consumers' perceptions of e-service quality attributes that drive their behavioral intentions and actual behavior (Parasuraman et al., 2005). This research explores how website attributes and e-service quality combine to enhance C-C identification and what that means for consumers' intention to search for information and to purchase online.

Website Attributes: Website Design

Attributes such as website design features, information richness, function, and entertainment can motivate consumers' interest in searching a website. Consumers might be attracted to a website based on its design, complexity, processing speed, and so on (Chen et al., 2002; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009). Consumers also expect websites to fulfill their desire for function (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Malhotra, 2005). For example, people go to youtube.com for videos because it functions as a search engine for videos, but also allows users to post comments and feedback for other people who share similar interests.

Visual attractiveness is defined as the degree to which a person believes that a website is aesthetically pleasing (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998, p. 375). A website's visual style plays a role by influencing not only usage frequency but also consumer decisions. Attractive design creates more favorable attitudes towards purchasing than unattractive design (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998). A website's graphic style, such as color, layout, print size and type, number of photographs, graphics and animation also

plays a critical role in attracting online consumers (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Hoque & Lohse, 1999; Schlosser & Kanfer, 1999). Consumers tend to associate the visual attractiveness of a website with positive beliefs about its products.

Website Attributes: Informativeness

Online consumers are motivated by a variety of psychosocial needs, apart from those strictly related to acquiring products. Therefore, information content is considered a website attribute associated with satisfaction, according to the Extended Use & Gratification Theory (Ducoffe, 1996). A growing body of literature applies the Use and Gratification (U & G) Theory to study the Internet as a shopping venue (Chen & Wells, 1999).

U&G theory posits that people use particular forms of mass communication to meet specific needs (Herzog, 1944). Users will likely continue using a particular form, such as a website, if their needs are gratified (Katz et al., 1973). With regard to Internet search behavior, Hausman and Siekpe (2009) indicated the importance of using terminology familiar to users, rather than computer jargon, to allow users to access desired information in less time. On the other hand, computer factors that affect the arrangement of information, such as page length and number of links, are also very important in determining informativeness, and therefore impact online search behavior (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009).

E-Service Quality

E-Service Quality is defined as the dimension that broadly includes all phases of a customer's interactions with a website: the degree to which a website facilitates efficient

and effective shopping, purchasing, and delivery. Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra (2000) explored those characteristics of a website desired by consumers. They tested a variety of website attributes from concrete cues (e.g., tab structuring, search engines, one click ordering), to consumers' perceived service quality based on several general perceptual attributes (e.g., perceived ease of finding what user is looking for, perceived transaction speed), to broad dimensions (e.g., ease of navigation in general, responsiveness to customer needs). These dimensions are thought to lead consumers to higher-order abstractions (e.g., overall perceived quality and value). Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra's (2000) study found that consumers' assessments of a website's quality stems not only from their experiences during their interactions with the website but also from post-interaction service aspects (i.e., fulfillment, returns). The researchers' theoretical framework (see Figure 12) helps to shed light on the cognitive structures of consumers, and specifically how they retain product information in their memory at multiple levels of abstraction (Parasuraman et al., 2005).

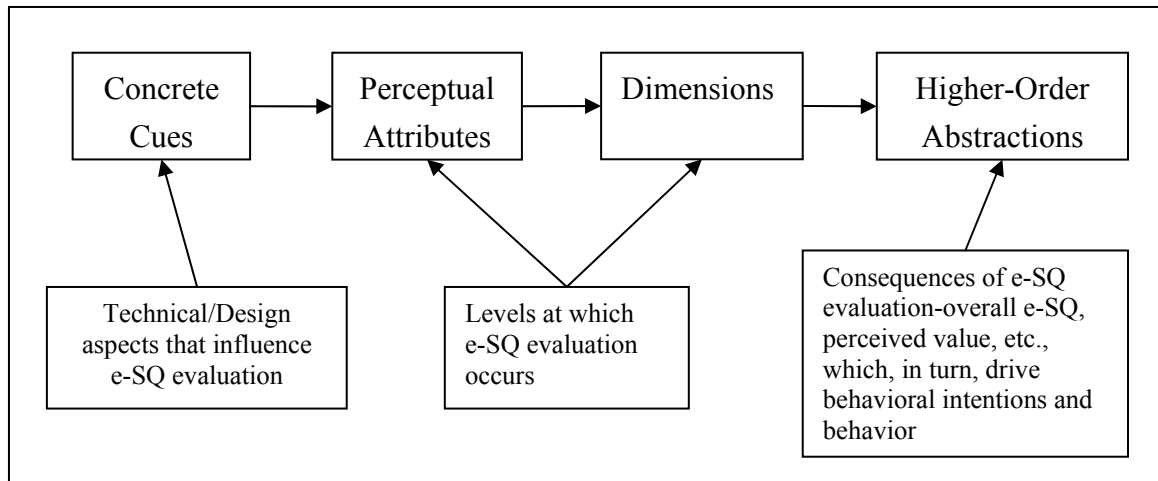


Figure 12: A Means-end Framework for Understanding the Domain and Consequences of e-SQ
 Source: Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A., & Malhotra, A. (2005). E-S-QUAL-A multiple-item scale for assessing electronic service quality. *Journal of Service Research*, 7(3), 213-233 (p. 218).

Figure 12 represents the core evaluative process for assessing e-SQ at the perceptual and dimensional levels. Website design offers concrete cues as antecedents that influence this evaluation process, whereas the higher-order abstractions are consequences of the process. Website features that assist the core evaluative process, particularly perceptual attributes, constituted the domain of items on the e-SQ scale.

Perceptual-level attributes are used for several reasons. First, perceptual attributes are more constant than concrete cues, in that concrete cues associated with a website will change when technology advances, while the more abstract perceptual attributes triggered by those cues do not change. For example, the concrete cues that currently signal one perceptual attribute of a website could include tab structuring, site maps, layering of information, and number of clicks to get online users to the correct location. Although these specific concrete cues will change (or be replaced by new cues) with advances in technology, a perceptual attribute such as easy maneuvering through the website will still

be relevant as an evaluative criterion. Second, because concrete cues associated with websites are generally of an engineering nature, not all users are aware of them or can assess how technically good they are. However, perceptual attributes, by virtue of their being more experiential than technical, are more easily assessed by all users, and thus are more scalable. When compared to dimension-level assessments, perceptual-attribute ratings are more specific and can provide insights into e-SQ disadvantages. When e-SQ assessments are needed, they can be obtained easily by aggregating the appropriate perceptual attribute ratings at the same time. Last, the connections in the theoretical framework between the e-SQ evaluative process (i.e., perceptual/dimension-level assessments) and its consequences (i.e., higher-order abstractions) constitute a natural “nomological net” for verifying the construct validity of an e-SQ scale consisting of perceptual-attribute level items. Empirical examination of the effects of perceptual-attribute level (and hence dimension-level) ratings on endogenous constructs such as perceived value and loyalty intentions led to the identification of several positive website perceptual attributes.

As the online market has grown over the years, electronic marketing activities have gained a lot of attention, particularly as companies seek to generate customer loyalty by improving e-service quality. Consumers’ perception of e-service quality is related to satisfaction and loyalty (Chang et al., 2009; Yen & Lu, 2008), and perceptions of value play a moderating role in determining the effect of e-service quality. Higher e-service quality increases the potential for future purchase and loyalty.

Delivering superior quality service to the consumer is more of a challenge in the

online environment. Companies have sought to understand how consumers perceive and evaluate website presence related to online service quality. Service connected to customer relationship management is currently the focus for sites like Amazon.com, Dealsea.com, Youtube.com, Cheaptickets.com, Travelocity.com, and Orbitz.com. These companies offer products and services that repeatedly cater to a consumer's needs and meet the consumer's desire for convenience and low prices. Elliot and Fowell's (2000) study showed that online shoppers can be discouraged by many website attributes, but particularly such attributes as lack of responsiveness of customer service, difficulty of website navigation, complexity in checkout process, and questions of security during a transaction.

Because of the invisible characteristics of online shopping, consumers depend more on service as a means to identify product quality (Parasuraman et al., 2005). For example, when purchasing a computer, due to the uncertainty about the product until it is delivered, services provided such as a UPS tracking system with package identity and real-time customer service response become very important to building consumer confidence in the product. Product also becomes important to service because some websites like Priceline.com only provide a service to acquire a product (i.e., e-ticket, travel package) but not the actual product. In the online environment, companies must shift their focus from traditional definitions of service quality to e-service quality to keep their customers from going elsewhere (Parasuraman et al., 2005). Online retailers will create a positive impression with customized service, which is often as important as the actual product.

Components of e-Service Quality

Early research on service quality (Grönroos, 1982; Lehtinen & Jarmo, 1982; Lewis & Bernard, 1983; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Sasser et al., 1978) proposed that it stems from a comparison between the services that customers expect a company to offer and the company's actual service performance. E-business transactions are largely conducted without human contact, thus, the instruments that have been widely used for measuring traditional service quality might not be appropriate or useful to evaluate the quality of e-service. Parasuraman et al. (1985) conducted empirical studies in several industries to develop a multiple-item instrument for measuring service quality. This measurement was a global assessment, rather than the traditional transaction-specific assessment, of service quality. Their scales included five dimensions: responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy, and tangibles.

Responsiveness is defined as the companies' willingness to help customers. Wan (2000) believes responsiveness online can be evaluated in at least two ways: load time and search time. Search time depends on the size of the website's database. On the other hand, it is an e-commerce challenge for website designers to load multiple pages with pictorial illustrations in a limited amount of time. When consumers experience an intolerably long wait time for a website's page to load or the wait time is longer than expected, they are likely to either redirect the web-browser to another website and/or stop using the website altogether (Weinberg, 2000). According to Roslow et al. (1992), wait time can be included in the evaluation of a website's service quality. System response time is also inversely related to computer user satisfaction (Schleifer & Amick, 1989). As

Lapierre (2000) indicated, responsiveness is the most important value because responsiveness can effectively establish and strengthen the relationship between the company and the consumer. Thus service quality will be evaluated more positively relative to the speed of a website's page loading (Weinberg, 2000).

Alongside responsiveness, service flexibility is also an important value driver (Lapierre, 2000). Service flexibility is defined as the variety of ways to pay, ship, and buy products or search for information. Service flexibility particularly pertains to how websites deal with emergency service, such as when a product is damaged in shipment. A good website must provide timely service that is unique to the specific situation at hand.

Yang and Jun (2008) measured e-service quality using two groups: Internet purchasers and Internet non-purchasers. They found that reliability was the most important dimension for Internet purchasers even when compared to access, ease of use, personalization, security, and credibility. Internet non-purchasers, in contrast, consider security as their most critical concern. Thus reliability has become increasingly important for online consumers who may not make the purchase if they sense the product's reliability has been compromised (Lapierre, 2000). Strong loyalty and commitment happen when consumers are consistently satisfied with the reliability of a website's products and services. Consumers actually evaluate a website's reliability based on whether it provided them with reliable information and safe transactions (Lee et al., 2002; Parasuraman et al., 2005; Ranaweera et al., 2008).

Measuring e-Service Quality

Online business competition has shifted academic awareness away from

traditional service quality to electronic service quality for sustaining e-business innovation. In turn, new technology adoption has become integral to consumers' purchase evaluations. Mick and Fournier's (1995) extensive qualitative study of how consumers interact with and evaluate technology-based products suggests that satisfaction with such products is the result of a highly complicated, meaning-laden, long-term process. Mick and Fournier (1995) also found that technology may trigger positive and negative feelings simultaneously. For example, consumer satisfaction, perceived service quality, and purchase behavior may be triggered at the same time in the online environment.

Service quality is not easy to control or to sustain (Cowles, 1989; Cowles & Crosby, 1990; Dabholkar, 1996; Eastlick et al., 1996). For example, technology readiness depends on users' technology beliefs, which influences their tendency to embrace new technologies (Parasuraman, 2000). Consumers will not tend to frequent a website that is difficult to use. Consumers' perceived usefulness and ease of use are correlated significantly with self-reported (Davis, 1989) and actual usage of technology (Szajna, 1996). Collectively, these studies reveal important differences in consumers' acceptance and usage of technologies depending on their technology beliefs, and suggest that similar differences might exist in the evaluative processes used in e-SQ judgments. For instance, usefulness and ease of use might represent website service quality, and customer-specific attributes (e.g., technology readiness) might be related to the attributes that they desire in a website, which would then distinguish superior e-SQ.

Loiacono, Watson, and Goodhue (2000) created Web-Quality, a scale for rating

websites on 12 dimensions: informational fit to task, interaction, trust, response time, design, intuitiveness, visual appeal, innovativeness, flow-emotional appeal, integrated communication, business processes, and substitutability. Though they found some website quality dimensions actually influence perceived service quality, other dimensions (e.g., innovativeness, business processes, and substitutability) did not. However, this scale's primary purpose is to collect information from website designers for design rather than to measure consumers' perceptions of website service quality.

To obtain information related to website service quality from the computer user's point of view, Barnes and Vidgen (2002) developed a completely different scale based on the weighted importance of five factors: usability, design, information, trust, and empathy. Data were obtained from convenience samples of university students and staff who were directed to visit one of three bookstore sites, to collect some information about a book of their choice, and then to rate their experience on the scale items. The scale was designed to be answered without requiring that the respondent complete the purchasing process. As a transaction-specific assessment of a website, it was not a comprehensive evaluation of the service quality of a website. Similarly, Yoo and Donthu (2001) developed nine items for measuring website quality on four dimensions: ease of use, aesthetic design, processing speed, and security. Their measurement covered aspects of the purchasing process and evaluation of website design related to appearance, speed, and security.

Szymanski and Hise (2000) examined customer perceptions of online convenience, merchandising (i.e., product offerings and product information), website design, and financial security relative to online satisfaction. Their study dealt more with

product information provided by a website and measured product satisfaction rather than service quality.

Wolfenbarger and Gilly (2003) used online and offline focus groups, a sorting task, and an online customer panel survey to develop a 14-item scale which contains four factors: website design (involving some attributes associated with design, personalization, and product selection), reliability/fulfillment (related to accurate product representation, on-time delivery, and accurate orders), privacy/security (safety and trust), and customer service (willingness to solve problems, willingness to help, and prompt answers to inquiries). Wolfenbarger and Gilly's scale is comprehensive and the dimensions of security/privacy and reliability/fulfillment indicated strong face validity and are highly descriptive. On the other hand, dimensions of website design and customer service appear less internally consistent and distinct. Related to their website design dimension, service quality was assessed through persuasive and in-depth information, level of personalization, selection, and speed of completing transactions. Their customer service factor contains items related to the company's willingness to respond to customer needs, the company's interest in solving problems, and the promptness with which inquiries are addressed.

Based on a comprehensive review and synthesis of the extant literature on e-SQ, Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Malhotra (2002) detailed five broad sets of criteria as relevant to e-SQ: (a) information availability and content; (b) ease of use or usability; (c) privacy/security; (d) graphic style; and (e) reliability/fulfillment. Many studies have examined various aspects of these criteria. Some have been hypothesized to be critical,

whereas the importance of others has been empirically examined. For example, depth and availability of information appear to be important to improve user's performance with the system even when the user can control the content, order, and duration of product-relevant information (Ariely, 2000).

Ease of use appears relevant to e-SQ because Internet-based transactions are complicated and can sometimes be intimidating to new users. Concerns about privacy (the protection of personal information) and security (the protection of users from fraud risk and financial loss) have been found to have a strong impact on consumer attitudes toward use of online financial services (Montoya-Weiss et al., 2003). Website design elements such as color, layout, print size and type, number of photographs and graphics, and animation have also been found to affect customer perceptions of service quality (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Hoque & Lohse, 1999; Schlosser & Kanfer, 1999). Finally, reliability/fulfillment has been cited as an important factor of e-SQ (Wolfenbarger & Gilly, 2003). Wolfenbarger and Gilly (2003) found that reliability/fulfillment ratings were the strongest predictor of satisfaction and service quality, and the second strongest predictor of intention to repurchase from a website.

Table 2: e-Service Quality Dimensions

Dimensions	Description
1. <i>Reliability</i>	Correct technical functioning of the website and the accuracy of service promises (having items in stock, delivering what is ordered, delivering when promised), billing, and product information.
2. <i>Responsiveness</i>	Website's quick response and ability to help consumers if there is a problem or question.
3. <i>Accessibility</i>	Ability to get on the website quickly and to reach the company

	when needed.
4. <i>Flexibility</i>	Choices of ways to pay, ship, buy, search for, and return purchased items.
5. <i>Ease of navigation</i>	Functions that help customers find what they need without difficulty, good search functionality that allows the customer to maneuver easily and quickly back and forth through the pages.
6. <i>Efficiency</i>	Website is simple to use and structured properly which requires a minimum of information to be input by the customer.
7. <i>Assurance/trust</i>	Confidence in dealing with the website due to its reputation and the products or services it sells, as well as clear and truthful information presented.
8. <i>Security/Privacy</i>	Website is believed to be safe from illegal intrusion and personal information is protected.
9. <i>Price knowledge</i>	Information available to determine shipping price, total price, and comparative prices during the shopping process.
10. <i>Website aesthetics</i>	Appearance of the site.
11. <i>Customization</i> <i>/Personalization</i>	How much and how easily the website can be customized to individual customers' preferences, histories, and ways of purchasing.

From: Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A., & Malhotra, A. (2005). E-S-QUAL-A multiple-item scale for assessing electronic service quality. *Journal of Service Research*, 7(3), 213-233.

Based on Zeithaml et al.'s (2000) study, website features were categorized at the perceptual-attribute level into 11 dimensions (see Table 2), and Parasuraman et al. (2005) conducted exploratory factor analysis on the items of these website features. This resulted in an e-service quality scale that consisted of 22 items on four dimensions. They labeled and defined these new dimensions as follows: (1) Efficiency: The ease and speed of accessing and using the site; (2) Fulfillment: The extent to which the site's promises about order delivery and item availability are fulfilled; (3) System availability: The correct technical functioning of the site; (4) Privacy: The degree to which the website is safe and protects consumer information. The present research uses these dimensions to investigate how e-service quality is related to website identification and use.

The Internet and Behavioral Intention

Apparel purchase research that connects consumer attitudes with behavioral intention has been consistent with the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), which indicates that consumers' attitudes are determinants of their behavioral intentions (search and purchase). Kim and Stoel (2004) found that some Internet attributes such as convenience and service (e.g., ease of credit for guaranteed or defective merchandise) are likely to lead to consumers' online apparel purchases.

Chen and Wells (1999) found that attitude toward a website can predict consumers' predispositions to respond to its offerings favorably or unfavorably. A useful website design increases the positive attitude of consumers toward the website. Their results indicate the positive relationship between perceived usefulness and attitude toward the website (Chen et al., 2002; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009). Further, the Use & Gratification Theory suggests higher informativeness and entertainment and lower irritation will likely generate a favorable attitude toward a website (Chen et al., 2002). Hence, consumers' perceptions of usefulness can strengthen their attitudes toward a website.

Purchase intention has a similar impact and has been identified as an important indicator of online shopping behavior (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Swaminathan et al., 1999). Chanaka et al. (2007) examined the purchase intentions of online retail consumers segmented by shopping orientation. The authors found that shopping orientations have no significant effect on the propensity for consumers to shop online, indicating that shopping orientations are similar in both the traditional world and on Internet. Therefore, they

recommend treating the online channel as an extension of traditional activities, simply enhanced by technology advances (i.e., the multi-channel approach).

Since the Internet is a channel without physical or time limitations, website design is important. Seock and Chen's (2007) findings identified several website attributes that can facilitate use. For example, apparel e-retailers need to develop a website that is easy to navigate (e.g., easy to follow the search path, the screens are not cluttered), provides sufficient and accurate product information (e.g., providing up-to-date information, showing all colors/sizes available), and provides good customer service (e.g., easy return, personal sales assistance, tracking order status). The more efficient a website's design and service, the easier it is for the consumers to navigate the website and more likely they will be to use the website again.

Knowledge driven consumers collect information and online knowledge through repeat online search usage (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000; Raju et al., 1995). Kim and Stoel (2004) studied the relationship between consumers' perceived quality of an online apparel website and satisfaction with the website. They found that website design that provides functions that meet consumers' informational fit-to-task, transaction capability and response time expectations is seen as higher quality, provided consumers had a fast but safe transaction experience. Thus, user-friendly and informative website design can motivate consumers' interest to browse and purchase.

The search process is defined as the motivational activation of knowledge in memory or acquisition of information from the environment (Engel et al., 1995, p. 176). Information and consumer preference is linked (Pipkin, 1981, p. 315), therefore

understanding consumer information search behavior is an important element of consumers' decision-making. Watchravesringkan and Shim (2003) examined the relationship between Internet information search and online shopping intention. Of the five dimensions of consumers' attitudes toward Internet shopping, (i.e., secure transaction, social shopping, speedy process, easy choice and saving money), secure transaction and speedy process were significantly related to both intention to search for information and to purchase apparel products. Internet speed and transaction security improved consumers' perceptions of the product and purchase experience. Online consumers search product information to assess quality and value prior to actual purchase.

Positive perceptions and experiences of online purchasing are significant predictors of online search and purchase intention (Watchravesringkan & Shim, 2003). This indicates higher intention to utilize search engines for information collection, as well as purchasing triggered through the online channel, if the website offers consumers a good browsing experience. Moon (2004) reported that Internet users' satisfaction with websites during a search period was determined by information quantity, website design, transmission speed, and user-friendliness of the structure.

Strategies and goals that drive consumer information search intention may be antecedents of purchase intention. Shopping can be a hierarchical process based on a series of events (Lichtenstein & Brewer, 1980). Goals of the shopping process will impact information search and purchase intention (Foss & Bower, 1986). Consumers use information they collect from various media to reach a purchase decision. Search behavior can consider brand, company, and product attributes as information cues.

However, the cost of searching is a concern during consumers' decision-making (Klein, 1998). Online searching can maximize time and economic benefits but can also detract by overwhelming the consumer with too many information alternatives.

Moon (2004) and Seock and Norton (2007) indicated that some consumers may search for information through the Internet, but purchase products/services through non-Internet channels. Therefore, online information searchers may differ from online purchasers when placing importance on website attributes. Specifically, online purchasers may be more critical of a website's service quality than people who only use the website to find information. Most previous studies have focused on the examination of either information search behavior or purchase behavior, but not both.

Seock and Chen (2007) provide one of the few studies that examine website evaluative criteria used by both online information searchers and online purchasers. They found that online information searchers evaluated the auditory experience/comparison shopping and navigation features as more important than online purchasers did. Online purchasers considered the auditory experience/comparison shopping features to be the least important criterion. This may be because online purchasers already identify with the website, and therefore do not focus on such features. The authors suggest that e-retailers should focus on building long-term relationships with online purchasers, instead of spending large amounts of resources on auditory experience/comparison shopping features for information searchers to motivate their purchase intention.

Companies that sell through multi-channels (e.g., having both offline retail stores and websites) should not ignore those customers who may use their website for

information search and then purchase the product from the brick and mortar store. Shim et al. (2001) indicate that consumers tend to make a purchase using multiple channel combinations, including offline stores, catalogs and the Internet. Therefore, information search does not necessarily result in product purchase through the same channel. However, online search has been shown to increase consumer purchase intention for the target product (Moon, 2004).

Conceptual Model

The purpose of this study is to examine how information search and purchase intention are influenced by a consumer's identification with a company's website, and whether this identification influences the consumers' perceptions of the websites' usefulness and their attitude toward the website. This research extends the TAM model with C-C identification to further strengthen the theoretical connection between consumer's self-definitional needs and organization identification in the online environment. One of the most important psychological consequences of purchase behavior is C-C identification. However, this area of research is in need of further empirical examination to refine the conceptual model and ultimately define strategies for online retailing.

Drawing on the extant literature, the model (see Figure 13) proposes that consumer-company identification is created by website attributes (e.g., perceived attractiveness and informativeness) and service quality attributes (e.g., efficiency, fulfillment, and system availability). As antecedents, e-service quality and website attributes influence the consumer's perceived usefulness of a website, which in turn

influences the degree of their consumer-company identification and their attitude toward the website. Lastly, consumers' intention to search for product information on a specific website mediates the relationship between their attitude toward the website and their intention to purchase a product from that website.

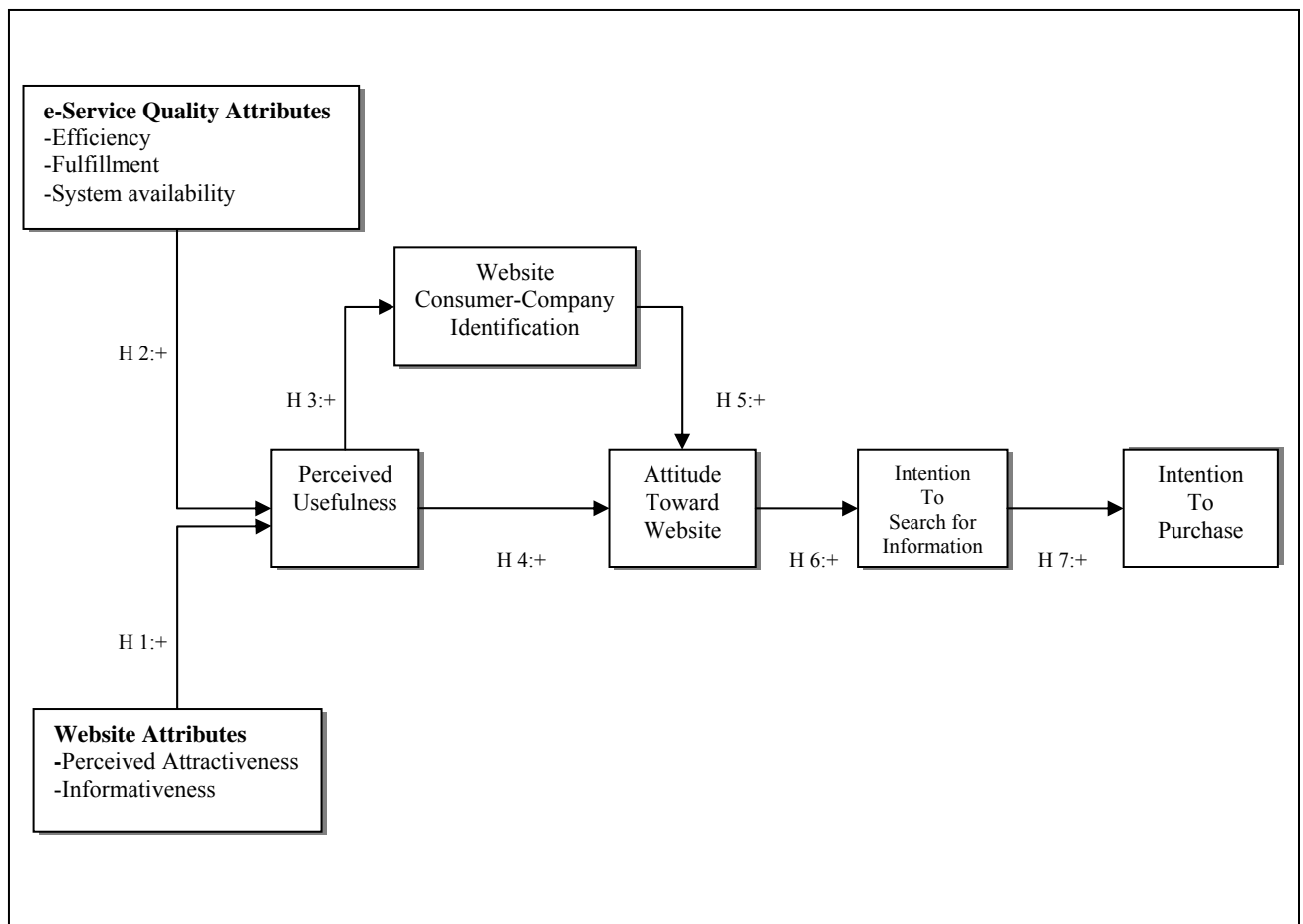


Figure 13: Conceptual Model

Hypotheses Development

Hypothesis 1: Relationship between website attributes and perceived usefulness

Within the online environment, computer factors are those elements which

provide functionality, such as technical aspects, navigation, impartiality, and information content (Liang & Lai, 2001). Human factors are those hedonic elements that increase consumer satisfaction with website use, including enjoyment, cognitive outcome, user empowerment, credibility, visual appearance, and organization of informational content (Zhang & Von Dran, 2000). Hausman and Siekpe (2009) found that computer factors have more impact than human factors. On the other hand, Seock and Norton (2007) revealed that product information, customer service, and navigation factors, as important website attributes, were closely related.

Perceived Usefulness (PU) is defined as the degree to which a person believes that using a technology will enhance his or her performance (Davis, 1989). PU has a significant effect on consumers' behavioral intention. Thus, website design features such as menus, icons, and links (computer factors), colors, graphics, and music (human factors), specifically enhance usability (Song & Zinkhan, 2003). In other words, a well-constructed, attractive website makes it appealing and informative and may increase consumers' perception of its usefulness (Chen & Wells, 1999)¹.

For increasing consumer's perception of usefulness, functions of the website's ease of use are important for those consumers who are not familiar with computers or might have higher avoidance behavior relative to searching for product information through the Internet. Therefore, the availability of necessary information (e.g., size, price,

¹ It is important to note the effect that perceived ease of use has on intentions, which is mediated through perceived usefulness (Kaplan et al., 2007; Venkatesh & Morris, 2000). However, its effect diminishes when users become familiar with technology (Gefen, 2003). Since university students are already familiar with website technology, perceived ease of use is expected to be minimal. This research therefore excludes it, similar to other research on consumers' attitude toward websites (Flavian et al., 2006; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009).

and payment procedure), forms, and instructions will play a role in consumers' formation of perceived usefulness. This study hypothesizes that the consumer will perceive the usefulness of a website positively if the website design is attractive and informative.

H₁: A website's attributes related to (a) perceived attractiveness and (b) perceived informativeness are positively related to its perceived usefulness.

Hypothesis 2: Relationship between website e-service quality and perceived usefulness

To deliver superior service quality, online retailers must understand how consumers perceive and evaluate online customer service. Traditional literature related to service quality concentrated on service delivered by people, but e-business transactions are largely conducted without human contact. Thus, the instruments that have been widely used for measuring service quality might not be appropriate or useful to evaluate the quality of e-service. Parasuraman et al. (2005) developed the (E-S-QUAL) scale to measure the quality of customer service delivered online. Their scales included four dimensions: efficiency, fulfillment, system availability, and privacy. All four dimensions were shown to significantly influence customers' assessment of service quality.

Reliability and validity tests suggested that the dimensions of efficiency (e.g., navigation, site load time) and fulfillment (e.g., product delivery speed) have the strongest influence on customers' perceptions of overall quality and value.

The definition of e-Service Quality consistent with that of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005), is the extent to which an Internet-based service facilitates efficient and effective transactional functions throughout all phases of a customer's interactions with it. As Balasubramanian, Konana, and Menon (2003) noted, service quality,

including its determinants with consumers' attitude and behavioral outcomes, needs further investigation, because some conventional quality dimensions may diminish in importance or become "unobservable" in online settings. According to Zhang and Prybutok (2004), service quality affects not only customer loyalty, but also perceived usefulness of online shopping.

Electronic commerce sites should consider providing not only needed services, but also services that are desired. Online consumers are motivated by a variety of psychological needs, apart from that of just acquiring products. The Use and Gratification Theory posits that individuals use particular forms of mass communication to meet their specific needs (i.e., convenience). During the purchase period, consumers will be more willing to repeat the experience if these needs are gratified (Katz et al., 1973). Thus, using technology and service improvement as predictors and focusing on both service quality and intention as outcomes provides a richer understanding of success among technology-based services (Hu et al., 2009). For example, Loonam and O' Loughlin (2008) found that information and transaction gratification were keys to online banking. They found that the connection between consumers' intention to use and gratification depends on e-SQ, and that perceptions of e-SQ enhance the perceived usefulness of the website. However, little research has taken an integrated perspective to better understand the relationships and relative importance of both service and technology characteristics as predictors of key outcomes (Hu et al., 2009; Venkatesh, 2006).

In Internet shopping, consumers make purchases without any assistance by service personnel. However, they do expect services to be offered by a website that optimize

their self-service (Globerson & Maggard, 1991). For this reason, in this study, service quality evaluations are expected to impact consumers' perceived usefulness of a website and represent an important construct relative to C-C identification and consumers' attitude toward a website. Ultimately, e-service quality should allow online users to access product information, and make an online purchase in an effective and efficient manner and in a secured environment using advanced technologies. Therefore, as indicated in Figure 14, this study hypothesizes that:

H₂: A website's e-service quality attributes related to (a) efficiency, (b) fulfillment, and (c) system availability are positively related to its perceived usefulness.

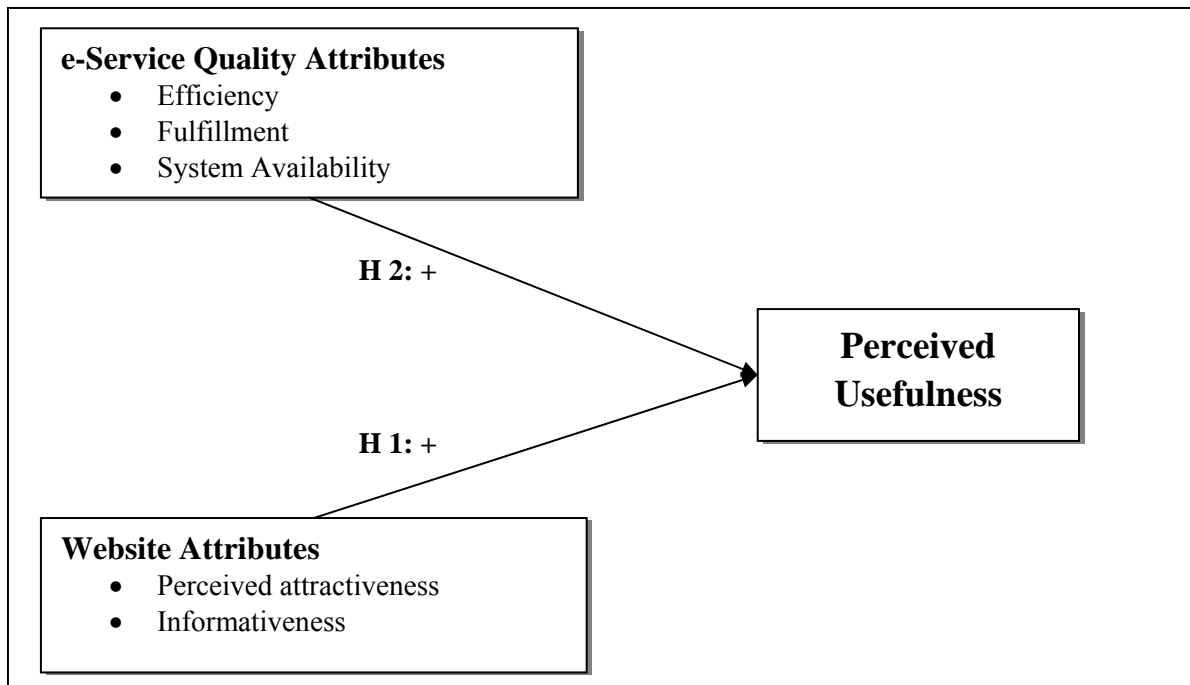


Figure 14: Website Attributes, e-Service Quality Attributes and Perceived Usefulness

Hypothesis 3: Relationship between perceived usefulness and consumer-company identification

The Technology Acceptance Model has its roots in social psychology and presents two key beliefs as predictors of intention to use a system: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis et al., 1989). Specifically, perceived usefulness is defined as the extent to which using the system will enhance an individual's productivity (Davis et al., 1989). In this study, perceived usefulness is predicted to impact attitude toward a website either directly or indirectly through consumer-company identification.

Cronin and Taylor (1992) noted that a website's service quality impacts attitude or a consumer's long-term overall evaluation of a website. Using a website to browse can enhance consumers' perceptions of its usefulness and facilitate a positive attitude toward it. Websites that satisfy consumers' information and service needs foster stronger identification by the consumer (Brown & Venkatesh, 2005; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Therefore, consumers more easily identify and recall websites that meet these needs (Ahuja, Gupta, & Raman, 2003; Hoffman, Novak, & Peralta, 1999; Ni & Ho, 2005; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2002; Zhang & Prybutok, 2005; Zhang, Prybutok, & Huang, 2006). A website that is perceived to be useful attracts and sustains consumers, which facilitates C-C identification. Therefore, this study assumes the perceived usefulness of a specific website will enhance consumer-company identification with this website (see Figure 15). This relationship is hypothesized as follows:

H₃: The perceived usefulness of a website is positively related to website consumer-company identification.

Hypothesis 4: Relationship between perceived usefulness and consumers' attitude toward a website

Chen and Wells (1999) indicate that attitude toward a website can predict consumers' predispositions to respond favorably or unfavorably to that website. Some researchers also indicate a positive relationship between perceived usefulness and attitude toward a website (Chen et al., 2002; Hausman & Siekpe, 2009). Besides the TAM, the U&G theory revealed that higher informativeness, entertainment, and low irritation are factors likely to generate a favorable attitude toward a website (Chen et al., 2002).

Perceived usefulness has been widely employed in studies of technology and has been shown to be important in influencing intention and use (Hu et al., 2009).

Technology characteristics like specific website features (e.g., functionality, usability) can affect its acceptance or usage by target users (Agarwal & Venkatesh, 2002). As consumers perceive higher utility associated with a store, they will be favorably disposed toward it. Thus, the relationship between perceived usefulness and consumers' attitude toward a website is hypothesized as follows:

H₄: The perceived usefulness of a website is positively related to consumers' attitude toward a website.

Hypothesis 5: Relationship between consumer-company identification and consumers' attitude toward a website

Social identity is defined as a part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63).

According to Social Identity Theory, individuals attempt to maintain their group reputation, motivated by an underlying need for self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus, individuals who strongly identify themselves with a specific group would make an effort to improve their groups' standing against other groups (Riketta & Landerer, 2005). For example, an employee's positive identification with their employer entails increasing their job performance (Bartel 2001; Benkhoff 1997; Efraty & Wolfe 1988). Known as attitudinal or affective organizational commitment, this is defined as the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization (Mowday et al., 1982). A positive relationship has been found between this commitment and a variety of behaviors such as performance, attendance, and even purchase intentions (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002; Riketta, 2002; Zhang et al., 2005).

Consumers have a tendency to purchase products relevant to their self identity or organizational identity. Through shopping for and owning identity-related products, consumers ultimately present the associated identity (Kleine et al., 1993; Solomon & Schopler, 1982). For example, college students often strongly identify with a group (Terry & Hogg, 1996), and so their intention to purchase collegiate products may be created and supported by the sense of belongingness to their respective organization provided by these products. Similar to product or brand loyalty, consumers will have positive attitudes toward stores, companies, or websites they like. The sense of belongingness that comprises C-C identification strengthens a positive attitude and is enhanced by positive product or service experiences. Therefore, a positive relationship between C-C identification and attitude toward the company's website is hypothesized

(see Figure 15).

H₅: Website consumer-company identification is positively related to consumers' attitude toward a website.

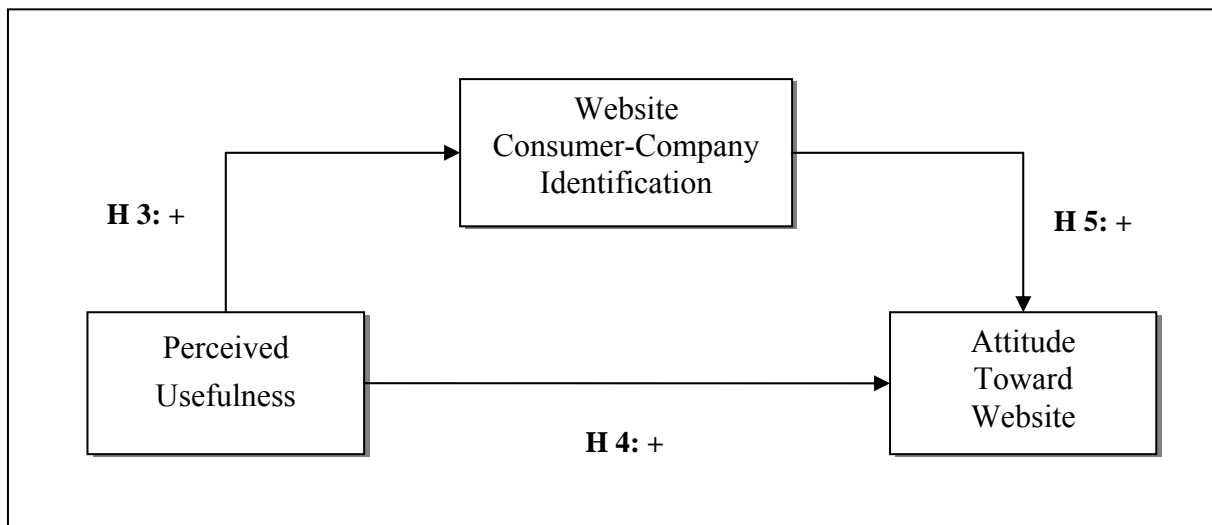


Figure 15: Perceived Usefulness, Website C-C Identification and Attitude toward Website

Hypothesis 6: Relationship between consumers' attitude toward a website and intention to search for information

Seock and Norton (2007) indicated that consumers' attitudes toward their favorite clothing websites had a direct, positive effect on their intentions to search for information at those websites and intention to purchase clothing items from those websites.

Additionally, operating through information search intention, attitudes toward those websites had an indirect and positive effect on intention to purchase clothing items from non-internet channels after finding the items at the websites.

Intention to use is regarded as an important long-term outcome and indicator of an information system's success (Bhattacharjee & Premkumar, 2004), as well as a driver of

future behavior (Zeithaml et al., 1996). During shopping, consumers collect information and knowledge through repeat online usage (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000; Raju et al., 1995). A consumer's intention to revisit a website is recognized as a result of his/her attitude toward using this website and toward online technology (Koufaris, 2002). A favorable attitude toward a website increases consumer intention to use the online channel to search for information. Consumers will make repeat purchases, visits, and recommend the website to others more often if their attitude toward the website is positive (Song & Zinkhan, 2003). In this study, the relationship between attitude and intention to search for information is hypothesized as follows:

H₆: Consumers' attitude toward a website is positively related to their intention to search for information via the website.

Hypothesis 7: Relationship between consumers' intention to search for information and intention to purchase

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that perceived usefulness is the primary predictor of behavioral intention (Venkatesh et al., 2003). By searching for product information on a website, a consumer is able to assess the quality of the product prior to a purchase, and at the same time, decide if the website is useful. Because the quality of goods cannot be determined before the actual purchase, the information provided by the website is likely to influence purchase intention (Bonn et al., 1999; Rowley, 2000; Watchravesringkan & Shim, 2003).

Positive perceptions of and experiences with online purchasing are significant predictors of continued online search intention and purchase intention

(Watchravesringkan & Shim, 2003). Moon (2004) reported that Internet users' satisfaction with websites during a search period was determined by information quantity, website design, transmission speed, and user-friendliness of the system. It is likely that consumers will have a higher intention to purchase if they are satisfied with these dimensions. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H₇: Consumers' intention to search for information via a website is positively related to their intention to purchase from the website.

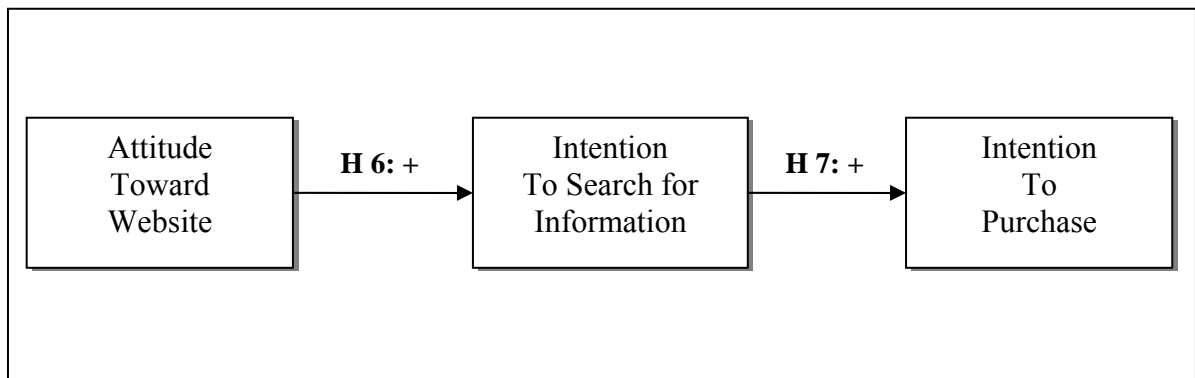


Figure 16: Attitude toward Website and Behavioral Intention

The conceptual model (see Figure 13) is empirically tested in the context of purchasing and searching for apparel. As an extension of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the framework investigated the constructs relative to a specific apparel retail website. Conceptually, website attributes, service quality attributes, perceived usefulness, website C-C identification, attitude toward the website, intention to search for information and intention to purchase are examined.

Summary

This chapter described the theoretical foundation underlying the study, as well as

the development of the constructs tested. Based on a review of pertinent literature, the conceptual model was introduced and hypotheses were presented. The next chapter will outline the research design and methodology used in the study.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology, including (1) Instrument Development; (2) Sample and Procedure; (3) Statistical Analysis; and (4) Summary.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the main purpose of the study is to understand how website consumer-company identification impacts consumers' attitudes and intentions with regard to online apparel shopping. The research objectives of this study are to:

1. Explore website attributes and e-service quality attributes as antecedents of online consumers' perceptions of a website's usefulness;
2. Examine the relationships among website consumer-company identification, consumers' perceived usefulness of the website and consumers' attitude toward the website;
3. Investigate the relationship between online consumers' attitude toward the website and their intention to search for information; and
4. Determine whether consumers' intention to search for information is related to their intention to purchase an apparel product from the website.

Below is detailed information about the methodology that was employed to achieve these objectives.

Instrument Development

A structured questionnaire was developed based on the review of extant literature as an aid to obtain conceptual and measurement information related to variables being

investigated. As a result, the written questionnaire was comprised of the following variables: website attributes (i.e., perceived attractiveness and informativeness), e-service quality attributes (i.e., efficiency, fulfillment, and system availability), perceived usefulness, website consumer-company identification, consumers' attitude toward the website, consumers' intentions to search for information and purchase an apparel product, general questions assessing consumers' online shopping experiences, and demographic information (see Appendix B).

Measures

Table 3 summarizes the major constructs that were employed in the current study. Where possible, measurement scales were selected for each construct for validation purposes. All of the major constructs being investigated in the study (i.e., website attributes, e-service quality attributes, perceived usefulness, website consumer-company identification, consumers' attitude toward the website, and consumers' intention to search for information and purchase an apparel product) were measured using a seven-point, Likert-type scale related to participants' level of agreement with each statement. The scales ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7) with a "not applicable" option (N/A) provided for all major constructs (see Appendix B).

Website Attributes

Two dimensions (i.e., perceived attractiveness and informativeness) of website attributes were measured with seven items, adopted from two major studies of Hausman and Siekpe (2009) and Heijden (2003). Of these seven items, four assess perceived attractiveness (e.g., "The layout of this website is attractive") and were adopted from

Heijden (2003), and three assess informativeness (e.g., “This website is a good source of product information”) and were adopted from Hausman and Siekpe (2009). This scale has established an acceptable level of reliability and validity as reported in the literature (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Heijden, 2003).

E-Service Quality Attributes

As discussed in Chapter Two, e-service quality attributes consist of three dimensions: (1) efficiency, (2) fulfillment, and (3) system availability. The e-service quality attributes scale was adopted from Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005) and consists of nineteen items. Of these nineteen items, eight capture efficiency (e.g., “This website makes it easy to find what I need”), seven capture fulfillment (e.g., “This site delivers orders when promised”), and four capture system availability (e.g., “This site is always available for business”). The scale has been widely employed in assessing e-service quality and has gone through numerous reliability and validity checks which have been reported in the literature (Balasubramanian et al., 2003; Hu et al., 2009; Parasuraman, 2000; Zhang & Prybutok, 2004).

Perceived Usefulness

Perceived usefulness was measured via a four-item scale adapted from Hausman and Siekpe (2009). Example statements are, “I find this website useful,” and “The website improves my shopping performance.” Previous research has revealed a satisfactory level of reliability and validity (Hausman & Siekpe, 2009; Järveläinen, 2007).

Website Consumer-Company Identification

A website consumer-company identification scale was drawn from Homburg,

Wieseke, and Hoyer (2009) and consists of five items (e.g., “I strongly identify with this company/website” and “I feel good about being a customer of this company/website”). The scale has also revealed a satisfactory level of reliability and validity in previous studies (Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009; Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Consumers’ Attitude toward the Website

Consumers’ attitude toward the website was measured with five items, adopted from Hausman and Siekpe (2009). Example statements include “This website makes it easy for me to build a relationship with this company,” “I am satisfied with the service provided by this website,” and “I feel comfortable in surfing this website.” The scale has also revealed an acceptable level of reliability and validity in previous research (Chen & Wells, 1999; Chen et al., 2002).

Consumers’ Intention to Search for Information and Purchase an Apparel Product

A three-item scale assessing consumers’ intention to search for information was adopted from Chen and He (2003) (e.g., “I would search for product information on this website before making a purchase” and “I would search for information to confirm whether I should buy a product from this website”).

A scale containing three items assessing consumers’ intention to purchase an apparel product was adapted from Hausman and Siekpe (2009). The questions ask, for example, “It is likely that I will purchase through this site.” Scales assessing consumers’ intention to search for information and purchase a product have shown a satisfactory level of reliability and validity in previous studies (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000; Raju et al., 1995).

General Questions Related to Consumers' Online Shopping Experiences

There are six items included in this section. All items were developed specifically for the current study by the researcher. For example, one question asks “How familiar are you with this website?” and was measured using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from “not familiar at all” (1) to “extremely familiar” (7). The second item assesses whether the participant has experience with purchasing any merchandise from the assigned website (www.ae.com), and was measured using a categorical scale. The other three items assess number of hours spent on the Internet each day, number of years using the Internet, and number of years using the Internet for apparel shopping. These three items were measured using nominal scales. Last, one item assesses whether the participant has experience with purchasing an apparel product online, and was measured using a categorical scale.

Demographic Information

Demographic information was measured in terms of (1) gender, (2) age, (3) area of study, (4) ethnicity, (5) year in school, and (6) personal monthly income. All items were assessed through categorical scales, except age, which was assessed through a ratio scale.

Table 3: Sources of Scales

Constructs	Conceptualization	Number of Items	Examples	Literature Source(s)
Website attributes	Characteristics that make a website attractive and informative.	4	Perceived attractiveness <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The layout of this website is attractive.• The colors on the website are attractive.• The design of this website is	Heijden (2003)

			<p>eye-catching.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, I find this website looks very nice. 	
		3	<p>Informativeness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This website is a good source of product information. • This website supplies relevant information for my purchase decision. • This website function is informative about the company's product. 	Hausman & Siekpe (2009)
E-service quality attributes	The ease and speed of accessing and using the website.	8	<p>Efficiency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This website makes it easy to find what I need. • It is easy to browse anywhere on the site. • This site enables me to complete a transaction quickly. • Information at this site is well organized. • This site loads its pages fast. • This site is simple to use. • This site enables me to get on to it quickly. • This site is well organized. 	Parasuraman et al. (2005)
	The extent to which the website's promises about order delivery and item availability are fulfilled.	7	<p>Fulfillment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This site delivers orders when promised. • This site makes items available for delivery within a suitable time frame. • It quickly delivers what I order. • It sends out exactly the items that I ordered. • It has in stock the items the company claims to have. • It is truthful about its offerings. • It makes accurate promises about delivery of products. 	

	The correct technical functioning of the website.	4	<p>System availability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This site is always available for business. • This site launches and runs right away. • This site does not crash. • Pages at this site do not freeze after I enter my order information. 	
Perceived usefulness	The belief that using a website will enhance a person's performance during online searching and purchasing.	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I find this website is useful. • The website improves my shopping performance. • The website enhances my shopping effectiveness. • The website increases my productivity in searching and purchasing products. 	Hausman & Siekpe (2009)
Website consumer-company identification	Deep, committed, and meaningful relationships that marketers seek to build with consumers. This identification occurs when a person's beliefs about an organization become self-referential or self-defining. C-C identification is conceptually distinct from identification of consumers with a company's brands and target markets.	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I strongly identify with this company/website. • I feel good about being a customer of this company/website. • I like to tell others that I am a consumer of this company/website. • This company/website image fits me well. • I feel attached to this company/website. 	Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer (2009)
Attitude toward the website	Consumers' perception that online purchase from a particular website is interesting and they feel comfortable utilizing the website.	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This website makes it easy for me to build a relationship with this company. • I am satisfied with the service provided by this website. • I feel comfortable in surfing this website. • I feel surfing this website is a good way to spend my time. 	Hausman & Siekpe (2009)

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compared with other websites, I would rate this one as one of the best. 	
Intention to search for information	A person's intention to search relative information of products or service from this website which enables them to act with a degree of confidence.	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would search for product information on this website before making a purchase. • I would search for information to confirm whether I should buy a product from this website. • I will definitely search product information from this website in the near future. 	Chen & He (2003)
Intention to purchase	A person's intention to purchase products or services from a website	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I intend to purchase through this website in the near future. • It is likely that I will purchase through this site. • I expect to purchase through this website in the near future. 	Hausman & Siekpe (2009)

Stimuli and Pretesting the Instrument

To select the appropriate stimuli (i.e., an apparel website) employed in the actual survey, thirty participants were recruited from the CRS: 332: Internship course offered in summer 2009. These participants were college students majoring in Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies (CARS) and were selected based on a similar background (e.g., area of study, age) to those who will be included in the actual survey. Participants were instructed that there were two major tasks that needed to be completed. First, they were instructed to list the top five websites they preferred when searching for or purchasing apparel. This was done in order to select the specific website to be employed during actual data collection. Websites were then given a score and assigned a ranking (from highest to the lowest) based on their popularity. According to the pretest results, the

participants' most favorite apparel websites were Victoria Secret (43%), American Eagle Outfitters (27%), Forever 21 (20%), Urban Outfitters (17%), and Express (13%).

Although Victoria Secret revealed the highest rating on favorite apparel website, the website has a strong association with female products. Therefore, it was deemed inappropriate to use this website in the actual study. American Eagle's website, the second most popular choice, was selected because it offers products that cater to female and male consumer needs, and it operates both brick and mortar and online retail channels.

Second, the participants were asked to evaluate the clarity of instrument items in the questionnaire. All aspects of the questionnaire were presented, including wording, question content, sequence, form and layout, question difficulty, and instructions. Relevant editorial changes were implemented based on the feedback of participants. Therefore, the final questionnaire contains eight major sections concerning website attributes, e-service quality attributes, perceived usefulness, website consumer-company identification, consumers' attitude toward the website, their intentions to search for information and purchase an apparel product, general questions about online shopping experience, and demographic information, respectively (see Appendix B for the final questionnaire).

Sample and Procedure

Data were collected from a convenience sample of undergraduate students attending the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the fall of 2009. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, students were deemed appropriate because they provide a

homogeneous sample (i.e., less noise or extraneous variations), which is desirable for theory testing (Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1981). In addition, college students were selected because the student population is known for its technological expertise (Seock & Chen, 2007) and a prime market for apparel products (Wolburg & Pokrywczynski, 2001). Students were recruited through various classes with the permission of instructors (i.e., APD 242: Design Principles; CRS 231: Introduction to Apparel and Consumer Retailing; CRS 331: Professional Development; CRS 463: Global Sourcing; RCS 464: Multicultural and Multichannel Retailing; and ISM 110: Business Computing). Approximately 300 responses were sought from these six classes.

Students who were at least 18 years old were invited to voluntarily participate in the study. Students who agreed to participate in the study and who were not attending a class that meets in a computer lab were asked to go to the computer lab. Once they were in the computer lab, they were provided two identical consent forms to read and sign. They returned one signed copy to the researcher and were instructed to keep the other for their personal records. After receiving the signed consent form, the researcher distributed the survey and provided step-by-step instruction on how to complete it. Participants were then asked to turn on the computer and visit the select online apparel website store (American Eagle at www.ae.com). They were asked to spend no more than five minutes browsing this particular website. Browsing consisted of reviewing the home page, as well as product search and selection. Participants were then asked to select a product for purchase, but not to make the actual purchase. Upon finishing the online browsing activity, they were then asked to turn off the computer and complete the questionnaire.

Statistical Analysis

Data obtained in this study was entered in SPSS 17 for statistical analysis. Descriptive analyses (e.g., frequency, means) were run on data related to general questions pertaining to online shopping experiences and demographic information. The reliability (e.g., Cronbach's α) and validity (e.g., average variance extracted values) of each multi-item scale was assessed prior to subsequent analyses.

Structural equation analysis via LISREL 8.8 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1996) was employed to test all hypotheses. The LISREL model consists of a full structural equation model and uses a full information maximum likelihood estimation technique to derive path coefficients (Bearden, Sharma, & Tell, 1982). The measurement model specifies how latent variables are measured in terms of the observed variables, whereas the structural model specifies the relationships among the unobserved constructs. Therefore, this technique allows for an examination of the hypothesized relationships among variables and constructs simultaneously.

Summary

This chapter describes the research methodology designed to address the research objectives and test the hypotheses (i.e., instrument development, selecting stimuli and pretesting the instrument; sample and procedure; and statistical analysis). The next chapter will present the results of the research.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter includes the following sections: (1) Description of Sample and Responses, (2) Measurement Model Analysis, (3) Structural Model Analysis and Hypotheses Testing.

Description of Sample and Responses

Data were collected from students at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro during October and November 2009. The survey was completed by 293 participants, with a total of 291 usable questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 99.5%.

Demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 4. The final sample ($N = 291$) was composed of 213 females (73.4%), 77 males (26.6%) and 1 missing value. The mean age of respondents was 22 years, with ages ranging from 18 to 51. The greatest number of participants were Caucasian-Americans ($n = 181$, 62.2%), followed by African-Americans ($n = 53$, 18.2%), Hispanic-Americans ($n = 9$, 3.1%), Asian-Americans ($n = 3$, 1.0%), and Other ($n = 36$, 12.4%).

The majority of participants were Juniors ($n = 74$, 25.5%), with the second largest group being Freshmen ($n=66$, 22.8%), and the third were Seniors ($n=65$, 22.4%). The majority of respondents indicated that they were Consumer, Apparel and Retailing Studies majors ($n = 121$, 41.6%), followed by respondents enrolled in Business Administration and related majors ($n = 103$, 35.4%).

Monthly income indicated by most respondents was under \$300 ($n = 84$, 28.9%),

followed by \$300-\$499 (n = 67, 23.1%) and \$500-\$749 (n = 44, 15.2%).

Table 4: Demographic Information

Characteristics	Frequency / Percentage	
Number of Respondents	Total: 291	
Gender	Total	Percentage
Male	77	26.6%
Female	213	73.4%
Missing	1	0.3%
Age (Mean), Standard Deviation	22	5.06
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	181	62.2%
African-American	53	18.2%
Hispanic-Latino(a)	9	3.1%
Asian-American	3	1.0%
Other	36	12.4%
Year at school		
Freshmen	66	22.8%
Sophomore	58	20.0%
Junior	74	25.5%
Senior	65	22.4%
Graduate level	25	8.6%
Major		
Consumer and Retail Studies	121	41.6%
Business Administration and related major	103	35.4%
Nutrition	20	6.9%
Education	7	2.4%
Kinesiology, Sports Medicine	6	2.1%
Undecided	5	1.7%
Communication	5	1.7%
Human Development	4	1.4%
Recreation Park Management	4	1.4%
Anthropology	1	0.3%
Apparel Design	3	1.0%
Commercial Recreation	1	0.3%
Counseling	1	0.3%
Education	1	0.3%
English	2	0.7%
Entrepreneurship	1	0.3%
Event Planning	2	0.7%
Hospitality	1	0.3%

Information System	1	0.3%
Nursing	1	0.3%
Recreation Park Management	1	0.3%
Monthly income		
Under \$300	84	28.9%
\$300-\$499	67	23.1%
\$500-\$749	44	15.2%
\$750-\$999	23	7.9%
\$1000-\$1299	31	10.7%
\$1300 or more	36	12.4%

Respondents' recent store website patronage characteristics are included in Table 5. Many of the respondents indicated familiarity with the assigned website (www.ae.com) with the largest proportion indicating a familiarity level of 5 out of 7 (n=69, 23.7%). However, a large portion (n= 109, 37.5 %) of the respondents indicated that they were not familiar at all to not very familiar (1 to 3) with the assigned website. Although they may shop at or recognize American Eagle stores, they may not be familiar with the website.

Twenty-one percent of respondents indicated that they have purchased items through the assigned website at one time (n=61, 21%) while the majority of the respondents have not purchased anything from the American Eagle website (n=230, 79%).

Regarding respondents' online shopping characteristics, most indicated that they spend 3-4 hours on the Internet per day (n = 116, 39.9%), followed by 1-2 hours per day (n=78, 26.8%), with the largest group having used the Internet for 5-6 years (n = 218, 74.9%), followed by 3-4 years (n=44, 15.1%). Most respondents have been shopping through the Internet for 3-4 years (n=148, 50.9%), followed by 1-2 years (n=94, 32.2%).

Table 5: Recent Store Patronage Characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency	Mean (S.D.)	Percentage
(1) How familiar are you with the website (www.ae.com)?	1 (N=48)	4.03	16.5%
1: Not familiar at all	2 (N=25)	(1.96)	8.6%
7: Extremely familiar	3 (N=36)		12.4%
	4 (N=43)		14.8%
	5 (N=69)		23.7%
	6 (N=32)		11.0%
	7 (N=37)		12.7%
(2) Have you purchased any merchandise from this website before (www.ae.com)?	Yes (N= 61)		21.0%
	No (N=230)		79.0%
(3) Hours using Internet per day			
0	N=8		2.7%
1-2	N=78		26.8%
3-4	N=116		39.9%
5-6	N=61		21.0%
7+	N=28		9.6%
(4) Years using Internet			
0	N=0		0.0%
1-2	N=4		1.3%
3-4	N=44		15.1%
5-6	N=218		74.9%
7+	N=25		8.7%
(5) Years shopping through the Internet			
0	N=1		0.1%
1-2	N=94		32.2%
3-4	N=148		50.9%
5-6	N=45		15.5%
7+	N=3		1.0%
(6) Purchased apparel online before	Yes (N=246)		84.8%
	No (N= 45)		15.2%
(7) Reasons for not purchasing apparel online (Response rate=175/291)			
Rarely do online shopping	14		8.0%
Prefer to shop in real store/channel	25		14.3%
Don't like AE brand	74		42.3%
Just shop in AE store	14		8.0%
First time to browse apparel online	3		1.7%
Price	15		8.6%
Hope to try fit before purchasing	20		11.4%
They didn't offer plus size	3		1.7%
I don't really know	1		0.6%
Time	1		0.6%
Shipment concern	2		1.0%
I worked in their store	1		0.6%

Transportation/Accessibility	1	0.6%
Security/Privacy	1	0.6%

Regarding past merchandise purchases, 85 percent of respondents (n= 246, 84.8%) indicated that they have purchased apparel or accessories through the Internet. Approximately 15 percent of the respondents (n= 45, 15.2%) indicated that they have not purchased apparel using the Internet. Clearly, most of the respondents have experience with Internet shopping and with making apparel purchases in the online environment. Most respondents spend about four hours on the Internet per day (n=116, 39.9%) to conduct their work, look for information and shop.

Reasons given for not shopping on the assigned website were primarily based on brand (n=74, 42.3%). The second most cited reason for not purchasing apparel through the assigned website was a preference for apparel shopping in the traditional store environment (n=25, 14.3%). Although they may use the website to find product information, they prefer to purchase in store. Some indicated that they prefer to try on the apparel product before they make a purchase (n=20, 11.4%), while others indicated that they rarely shop online for apparel (n=14, 8%). Price, shipment security, time, transportation and lack of plus sizes were other reasons given by respondents for not shopping for apparel at this online store.

Measurement Model Analysis

Measurement model analysis was based on the seven constructs discussed earlier: (1) Website Attributes, (2) e-Service quality, (3) Perceived Usefulness, (4) Website Consumer-Company Identification, (5) Attitude toward the Website, (6) Intention to

Search for Information, and (7) Intention to Purchase. For the purpose of measurement purification and item refinement, item inter-correlations were examined for values indicating very high or very low associations. None were found. According to Hair et al.'s (1998) suggestions for factor analysis, Bartlett's test of Sphericity (p -value < 0.0001) was employed to test the significance of each item and the measure of sampling adequacy (MSA). Before conducting a factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of Sphericity were used to examine the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis.

KMO Test and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy tests whether the partial correlations among variables are small. Bartlett's test of Sphericity tests whether the correlation matrix is an identity matrix (it is not appropriate to conduct a factor analysis when the correlation matrix of variables is an identity matrix), which would indicate that the factor model is inappropriate.

Table 6: KMO Test and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity

Construct	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO)	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity Approx. Chi-Square (df)	Sig
1. Website Attributes	.866	1332.255 (21)	.000
2. E-service Quality Attributes	.916	1769.997(171)	.000
3. Perceived Usefulness	.820	959.020(6)	.000
4. Website C-C Identification	.865	1239.698(10)	.000
5. Attitude toward Website	.821	750.225(10)	.000
6. Intention to Search Information	.672	201.774(3)	.000
7. Intention to Purchase	.773	1133.835(3)	.000

The KMO measure of sampling adequacy is an index for comparing the magnitudes of the observed correlation coefficients to the magnitudes of the partial correlation coefficients. KMO also measures sampling adequacy, which should be greater than 0.5 for a satisfactory factor analysis. Another indicator of the strength of the relationship among variables is Bartlett's test of Sphericity. Bartlett's test of Sphericity is used to test the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix to differentiate that variables in the population correlation matrix are uncorrelated. The observed significance level is .000, which means it is small enough to reject the null hypothesis. Using these two tests, it was concluded that the strength of the relationships among variables was strong, providing good indices for factor analysis.

The KMO measure of sampling adequacy tests whether the partial correlations among variables are small, with values sought from 0 to 1. According to the KMO, sampling adequacy should be greater than 0.5 in order for a satisfactory factor analysis to occur. On the other hand, Bartlett's test of Sphericity tests whether the correlation matrix is an identity matrix, which would indicate that the factor model is inappropriate. As shown in Table 6, the KMO measure for each construct is from .672 to .916, and the Bartlett's test of Sphericity for each construct is significant, thus providing justification of that factor analysis can proceed.

The factor structure of survey measurements was tested as part of the Structural Equation Modeling analysis via LISREL 8.8. The model was estimated by full information maximum-likelihood method which is different from the regular MLE method.

Factor analysis is concerned with exploring the patterns of relationships among a number of research variables. These patterns are represented by what are called factors. Examination of the loadings of variables on each factor helps to identify the character of underlying dimensions. In Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), each factor is a latent variable in the measurement model. SEM analyses can provide statistical tests of the goodness-of-fit for a proposed confirmatory factor solution, which is not available through traditional exploratory factor analysis offered by statistical software such as SPSS.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) provides validation of scales for the measurement of specific constructs. In the CFA measurement model for this study, the indicators are depicted with Xs and latent variables labeled as constructs. This model represents the hypothesis that Xi variables assess the construct of this research. The single-arrows that point from the factor to the indicator represent the presumed direct causal effect of the latent variable on the observed measure (Kline, 2004, p. 199). The statistical estimates of these direct effects are called factor loadings. Factor loadings in CFA are generally interpreted as regression coefficients that may be in unstandardized or standardized form. As is the case in this research, indicators assumed to be caused by latent variables are called effect indicators.

In CFA, overall model fit indicates the degree to which specified indicators represent the hypothesized constructs. The three types of overall model fit measures useful in SEM can be represented by the following indices:

Table 7 : Structural Equation Modeling Goodness of Fit Summary
(N=291)

	Fit measure	Fit Guideline Criteria	Proposed Model	Accepted
Absolute fit	Chi-square	p>.05	2571.05 (p<.000)	
	Normed chi-square (X ² / Degree of freedom)	p<3.0	2.65	✓
	Goodness-of-fit index (GFI)	p>.90	0.71	
Incremental fit	Normed Fit Index (NFI)	p>.90	0.93	✓
	Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	p>.90	0.95	✓
Parsimonious fit	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	p<.08	0.08	✓

Source: Hu, L., & Bentler, P.M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling*, 6(1), 1-55.

Absolute fit measures assess the overall model fit (both structural and measurement models collectively), with no adjustment for the degree of “overfitting” that might occur. Incremental fit measures compare the proposed model to another known model. Lastly, parsimonious fit measures take the complexity of the model into account. Researchers are encouraged to employ one or more measures from each type. An acceptable level of overall goodness-of-fit does not guarantee that all constructs will meet the fit requirements for the measurement model, nor is the structural model certain to be fully supported. The researcher must assess each of these areas separately to confirm whether they meet the requirement or to use these fit indices to identify potential problems that affected overall goodness-of-fit.

As depicted in Table 7, the SEM model had a significant χ^2 index ($\chi^2=2571.05$; d.f. = 969; $p < 0.001$) which indicates that the model does not fit the data (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hu & Bentler, 1999). However, as χ^2 is a direct function of sample size, it is often

too sensitive. This may lead to an inaccurate probability value to the model (Fornell, 1983; Segars & Grover, 1993). Instead, other fit indices are used to indicate fit, including $\chi^2/\text{d.f.} = 2.65$, which is below the desired cut-off value of 3.0 as recommended in the literature (Segars & Grover, 1993). The GFI= 0.71 is lower than 0.9, but the NFI= 0.93 and CFI= 0.95 are greater than 0.9, as recommended. Lastly, RMSEA, which is based on the concept of non-centrality, is reported at 0.08, and just meets the recommended cut-off value of 0.08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1992). Therefore, it can be concluded that the measurement and structural model yields an acceptable fit.

Table 8: Completely Standardized Factor Loadings

Construct	Factor	Lambda X		z-statistic	P-value	Completely Standardized Factor Loading
1.Website Attribute	Perceived Attractiveness	PA1	1.00			0.89
		PA2	1.07	18.73	***	0.83
		PA3	1.07	17.49	***	0.80
		PA4	0.99	19.36	***	0.85
	Informativeness	IN1	1.00			0.88
		IN2	0.91	16.76	***	0.83
		IN3	0.89	14.57	***	0.75
		2.e-Service quality	Efficiency	EF1	1.00	
EF2	1.04			13.38	***	0.76
EF3	0.68			4.04	***	0.24
EF4	0.98			14.13	***	0.80
EF5	1.22			11.84	***	0.68
EF6	1.14			14.48	***	0.81
EF7	1.21			13.65	***	0.77
EF8	1.06			14.63	***	0.82
Fulfillment	FL1		1.00			0.83
	FL2		0.70	11.34	***	0.61
	FL3		1.06	20.91	***	0.93
	FL4		1.11	20.09	***	0.91
	FL5		0.77	12.66	***	0.67
	FL6		0.65	11.04	***	0.60
	FL7		0.95	15.86	***	0.78
System Availability	SA1		1.00			0.42
	SA2		1.07	5.94	***	0.64
	SA3		1.62	5.50	***	0.53
	SA4		2.12	5.82	***	0.60
Lambda Y						
3.Perceived Usefulness		PU1	1.00			0.74

4.Website Consumer- Company Identification	PU2	1.48	14.52	***	0.84
	PU3	1.56	15.43	***	0.89
	PU4	1.59	14.37	***	0.83
	CCI1	1.00			0.86
	CCI2	1.03	18.23	***	0.83
	CCI3	1.20	18.81	***	0.85
	CCI4	1.17	21.28	***	0.91
	CCI5	1.09	18.10	***	0.83
5.Attitude toward the Website	AW1	1.00			0.72
	AW2	1.14	10.25	***	0.63
	AW3	0.62	9.55	***	0.59
	AW4	1.21	11.91	***	0.74
	AW5	1.02	11.61	***	0.72
6.Intention to Search Information	IS1	1.00			0.47
	IS2	0.97	5.46	***	0.42
	IS3	2.08	7.69	***	0.82
7.Intention to Purchase	IP1	1.00			0.92
	IP2	1.05	30.93	***	0.96
	IP3	1.05	30.03	***	0.95

Note: First λ path was set to 1, therefore, no z-values are given

*z-value (two-tailed) = 1.96 ($p < .05$), **z = 2.58 ($p < .01$), ***z = 3.45 ($p < .001$).

Seven items were used to measure website attributes (see Lambda-X in Table 8). Items with loadings for perceived attractiveness (e.g., PA-1 = 0.89, PA-2 = 0.83) and for informativeness (e.g., IN-1 = 0.88, IN-2 = 0.83) were observed. Nineteen items were used to measure e-service quality, including eight items of efficiency (factor loadings ranked from 0.24 to 0.82), seven items of fulfillment (factor loadings ranked from 0.60-0.93), and four items of system availability (factor loadings ranked from 0.42 to 0.64). Four items measured the perceived usefulness factor (factor loadings ranked from 0.74 to 0.89). Website consumer-company identification includes five items with loadings that range from 0.83 to 0.91. Five items indicating attitude toward the website include loadings from 0.59 to 0.74. Regarding behavioral intention, intention to search for information included three items loading from 0.42 to 0.82. Intention to purchase included three items with loadings from 0.92 to 0.96.

Table 9: Measurement Validity and Reliability

Construct		Standardized Factor Loading (λ) (t-value)	Composite Factor Reliability (CR)	Construct Reliability (Cronbach's α)	Average Variance Extracted Values (AVE)
Website Attribute			0.94	0.89	0.70
Factor-1: Perceived Attractiveness (ξ 1)	PA1	0.89	0.91		0.71
	PA2	0.83			
	PA3	0.80			
	PA4	0.85			
Factor-2: Informativeness (ξ 2)	IN1	0.88	0.86		0.68
	IN2	0.83			
	IN3	0.75			
e-Service quality			0.95	0.88	0.51
Factor-1: Efficiency (ξ 3)	EF1	0.76	0.90		0.53
	EF2	0.76			
	EF3	0.24			
	EF4	0.80			
	EF5	0.68			
	EF6	0.81			
	EF7	0.77			
	EF8	0.82			
Factor-2: Fulfillment (ξ 4)	FL1	0.83	0.91		0.60
	FL2	0.61			
	FL3	0.93			
	FL4	0.91			
	FL5	0.67			
	FL6	0.60			
	FL7	0.78			
Factor-3: System Availability (ξ 5)	SA1	0.42	0.63		0.31
	SA2	0.64			
	SA3	0.53			
	SA4	0.60			
Perceived Usefulness (η1)	PU1	0.74	0.90	0.89	0.69
	PU2	0.84			
	PU3	0.89			
	PU4	0.83			
Website Consumer-Company Identification (η2)	CCI1	0.86	0.93	0.93	0.73
	CCI2	0.83			
	CCI3	0.85			
	CCI4	0.91			
	CCI5	0.83			
Attitude toward the Website (η3)	AW1	0.72	0.81	0.81	0.47
	AW2	0.63			
	AW3	0.59			
	AW4	0.74			
	AW5	0.72			
Intention to Search Information (η4)	IS1	0.47	0.60	0.75	0.36
	IS2	0.42			
	IS3	0.82			
Intention to Purchase (η5)	IP1	0.92	0.96	0.96	0.89
	IP2	0.96			
	IP3	0.95			

Note:

Composite Factor Reliability (CR) = $(\sum \lambda)^2 / [(\sum \lambda)^2 + (\sum \theta)]$

Average Variance Extracted Values (AVE) = $(\sum \lambda^2) / [(\sum \lambda^2) + (\sum \theta)]$

λ (Lambda): Completely Standardized Factor Loading Value

θ (Theta-Delta): Indicator error variances

Cronbach's alpha (α) = $N * C\text{-bar} / [V\text{-bar} + (N-1) * C\text{-bar}]$

N: Number of items

C-bar: Average inter-item covariance among the items.

V-bar: Average variance.

Note: The bold values are the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct.

On the other hand, a confirmatory factor analysis of the multi-item scales in the measurement model (see Table 8) shows that each factor loading of the indicators for each construct were statistically significant and sufficiently high for structural model testing. All standardized factor loadings (Lambda X and Lambda Y) were greater than .50 (except the SA-1 of the e-service quality construct), which indicates reasonable convergent validity (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Psychometric Properties

Measurement model analysis was used to assess the psychometric properties to measure reliability and validity of measurement items. Cronbach's α and composite factor reliability (CR) were therefore applied to assess reliability. Specifically, information from the measurement model was used to compute the average variance extracted (AVE) to measure convergent validity. Discriminant validity was measured by comparison of the construct's correlation to other constructs and the square root of AVE.

First, Cronbach's α was used to assess reliability related to internal consistency between constructs and set an acceptable level that is more than 0.7 (Hair et al., 1998). As shown in Table 9, Cronbach's α values ranged from 0.75 to 0.96, and thus indicate high internal consistency among items.

Second, convergent validity and discriminant validity were also examined to assess construct validity. Convergent validity refers to the degree to which two measures of the same concepts are correlated (Hair et al., 1998). Convergent validity is demonstrated when different instruments are strongly correlated. High convergent validity indicates that measurement scales meet the intended concept and the instruments are measuring what they were intended to measure.

Three standards to measure convergent validity were used: (1) a factor loading value larger than 0.5; (2) Composite reliability (CR) larger than 0.7; and (3) Average variance extracted (AVE) larger than 0.5 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 1998). CR was calculated to test the internal consistency between latent variables. As shown in Table 9, factor loading values ranged from 0.24 to 0.96, with most results above .7, and therefore meet acceptable levels. The CR of each construct ranged from 0.60 to 0.96, with most in the 0.9 range, indicating high internal consistency for most constructs. Average variance extracted (AVE) values of constructs across the sample exceeded the threshold of 0.5, indicating that constructs have explained a relatively high level of variance (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In Table 9, AVE values of each construct are from 0.36 to 0.89, with most in the 0.5 or greater range, thus meeting

acceptable levels, and providing evidence that convergent validity is acceptable among measurement constructs.

Lastly, discriminant validity between constructs requires a construct to be distinctive from other constructs with the square root of the average variance extracted from it greater than its correlations with other latent constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 10, the values of square root of the average variance extracted ranged from 0.56 to 0.94, greater than its correlations with other latent constructs. These results indicate that discriminant validity exists between constructs.

Table 10: Correlations among the Factors of the Measurement Model

Model Variable	Mean	Std.Dev	Correlations (n=291)									
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. WA-PA	5.6	1.02	(0.84)									
2. WA-IN	5.7	0.98	0.54**	(0.82)								
3. SQ-EF	5.9	0.88	0.65**	0.63**	(0.73)							
4. SQ-FL	5.8	0.95	0.42**	0.48**	0.62**	(0.77)						
5. SQ-SA	6.1	0.98	0.48**	0.44**	0.66**	0.71**	(0.56)					
6. PU	5.6	1.29	0.56**	0.51**	0.59**	0.55**	0.40**	(0.83)				
7. WCCI	4.6	1.60	0.47**	0.34**	0.34**	0.39**	0.17*	0.54**	(0.85)			
8. AW	5.1	1.29	0.52**	0.36**	0.55**	0.45**	0.33**	0.57**	0.79**	(0.69)		
9. IS	5.0	1.36	0.34**	0.32**	0.35**	0.38**	0.27**	0.39**	0.46**	0.51**	(0.60)	
10. IP	4.0	2.01	0.30**	0.14**	0.20**	0.39**	0.18*	0.39**	0.75**	0.68**	0.47**	(0.94)

Note: *, if $p < .05$; **, if $p < .01$ (two-tailed). The bold diagonal values are the square root of the average variance extracted for each construct.

Structural Model Analysis and Hypotheses Testing

To test the proposed research framework and hypotheses, structural equation modeling was used.

Model Testing

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using the full information

maximum-likelihood estimation procedure through LISREL 8.8. The relationships in the model were based on theoretical associations discussed in Chapter II. Results of SEM indicated that most of the hypothesized paths were significant at the $p < .05$ level. Squared multiple correlations (R^2) are reported for each endogenous construct as well as path coefficients and z -values for each statistically significant path and included in Appendix D. To assess model fit, chi-square statistics (χ^2), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), Normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were used.

As discussed previously, the full model had a χ^2 test-statistic of 2571.05 (d.f. = 969; $p < .000$), and fit indices were GFI=0.71, NFI=0.93, and CFI=0.95 (see Table 7). The model's RMSEA index is 0.08, with a 90 percent confidence interval between 0.077 and 0.084, indicating an acceptable model fit for the data. Most indices indicate that the proposed model fits the data well. The model's structural equations are displayed below in Figure 17 and Table 11.

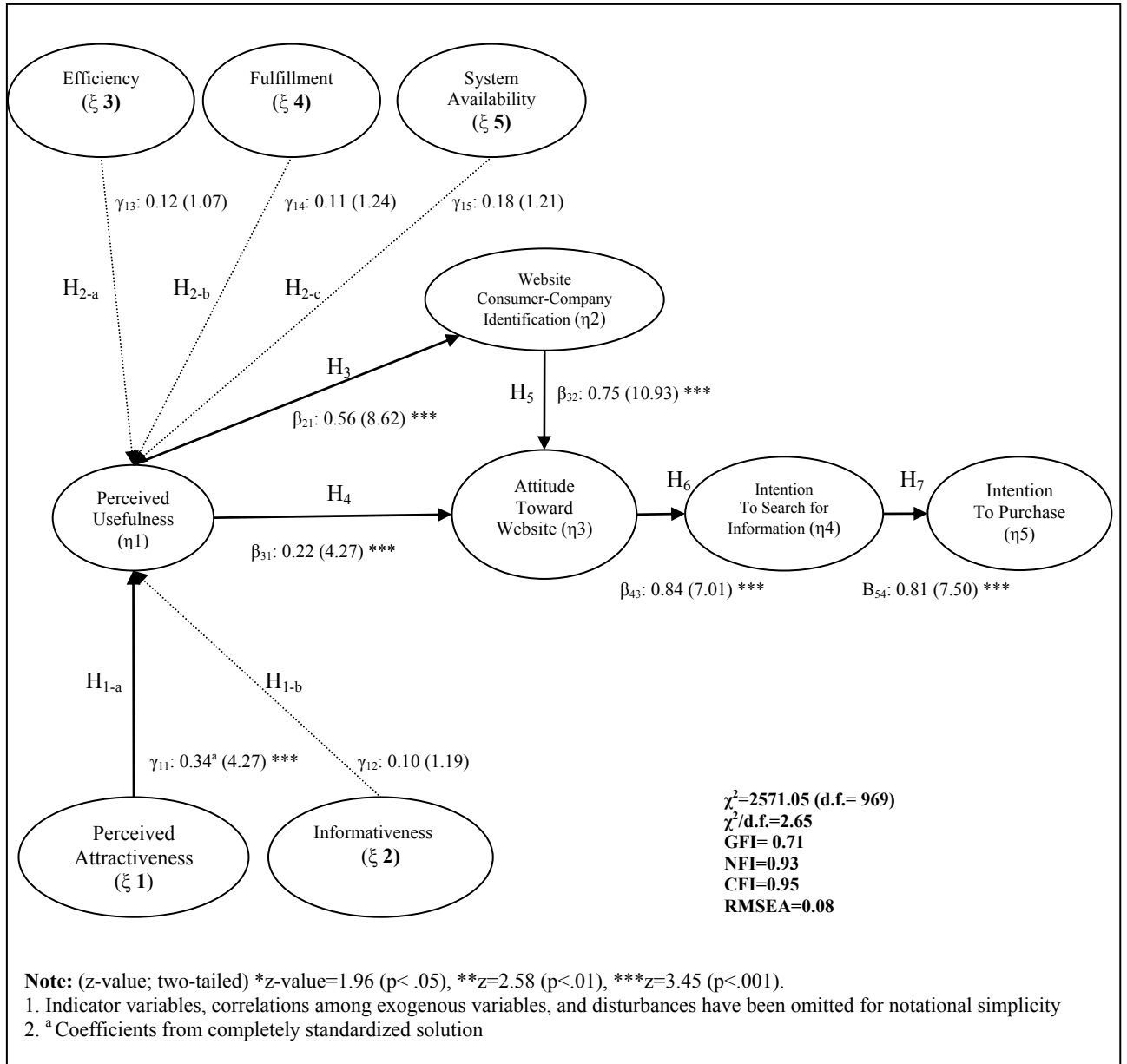


Figure 17: Conceptual Path Model

Hypothesis Testing

The patterns of direct effects revealed by the path model as shown in Figure 17 provide somewhat mixed support for the study's hypotheses. This model specifically describes each path relationship. Path results of SEM are indicated in Table 11.

Table 11: Results of SEM

Hypothesis	Standardized regression weight	Raw	Standard Error (S.E.)	z-value (significance)
H _{1-a} : Perceived Attractiveness -> Perceived usefulness	0.34	0.34	0.08	4.27***
H _{1-b} : Informativeness-> Perceived usefulness	0.10	0.10	0.08	1.19
H _{2-a} : Efficiency -> Perceived usefulness	0.12	0.14	0.14	1.07
H _{2-b} : Fulfillment -> Perceived usefulness	0.11	0.04	0.03	1.24
H _{2-c} : System availability -> Perceived usefulness	0.18	0.20	0.17	1.21
H ₃ : Perceived usefulness -> Website C-C identification	0.56	0.92	0.11	8.62***
H ₄ : Perceived usefulness ->Attitude toward website	0.22	0.30	0.07	4.27***
H ₅ : Website C-C identification -> Attitude toward website	0.75	0.62	0.06	10.93***
H ₆ : Attitude toward website -> Intention to search for information	0.84	0.50	0.07	7.01***
H ₇ : Intention to search for information -> Intention to purchase	0.81	2.13	0.28	7.50***

Note: N=291, *z-value (two-tailed) =1.96 (p<.05), **z=2.58(p<.01), ***z=3.45 (p<.001).

Raw: Coefficient from estimates solution

A positive relationship was found between website attributes and perceived usefulness, and thus H₁ was partially supported. Specifically, the positive and direct relationship predicted in H_{1-a} between perceived attractiveness and perceived usefulness was supported by the data ($\gamma_{11} = 0.34$, $z = 4.27$, $p < .001$). The positive and direct relationship predicted in H_{1-b} between Informativeness and Perceived Usefulness predicted in H_{1-b} was not supported ($\gamma_{12} = 0.10$, $z = 1.19$, $p > .05$).

Hypothesis 2, predicting a positive relationship between e-service quality and perceived usefulness, was not supported. A positive relationship between efficiency and

perceived usefulness (H_{2-a}) was not supported ($\gamma_{13} = 0.12, z = 1.07, p > .05$). Likewise, a positive relationship between fulfillment and perceived usefulness (H_{2-b}) was not supported ($\gamma_{14} = 0.11, z = 1.24, p > .05$). Lastly, the positive relationship predicted between system availability and perceived usefulness (H_{2-c}) was not supported ($\gamma_{15} = 0.18, z = 1.21, p > .05$). Thus $H_{2-a}, H_{2-b}, H_{2-c}$ were not supported.

The positive relationship predicted between perceived usefulness and website consumer-company identification (H_3) was supported ($\beta_{21} = 0.56, z = 8.62, p < .001$) and a large effect ($>.5$) was found between these two variables. The positive relationship predicted between perceived usefulness and attitude toward the website (H_4) was also supported ($\beta_{31} = 0.22, z = 4.27, p < .001$) and a moderate effect ($>.1$) was found between these two variables. H_5 predicted a positive relationship between website consumer-company identification and consumers' attitude toward the website, and was also supported ($\beta_{32} = 0.75, z = 10.93, p < .001$) and a large effect ($>.5$) was found between these two variables.

Related to consumers' behavioral intentions, H_6 predicted a positive relationship between consumers' attitude toward the website and their intention to search for information. This was supported by the data ($\beta_{43} = 0.84, z = 7.01, p < .001$) and a large effect ($>.5$) was found between these two variables. Lastly, the positive relationship predicted between consumers' intention to search for information within the website and their intention to purchase was also supported ($\beta_{54} = 0.81, z = 7.50, p < .001$) and a large effect ($>.5$) was found between these two variables. In sum, H_1 was partially supported, H_2 was not supported, and H_3, H_4, H_5, H_6 , and H_7 were supported by the data (see Table

12).

Table 12: Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypotheses	Supported?
H₁ : A website's attributes related to (a) perceived attractiveness and (b) perceived informativeness are positively related to its perceived usefulness	Partial
H_{1-a} : A website's attributes related to (a) perceived attractiveness is positively related to its perceived usefulness	Y
H_{1-b} : A website's attributes related to (b) perceived informativeness is positively related to its perceived usefulness	N
H₂ : A website's e-service quality attributes related to (a) efficiency, (b) fulfillment, and (c) system availability are positively related to its perceived usefulness.	N
H_{2-a} : A website's e-service quality attributes related to (a) efficiency is positively related to its perceived usefulness.	N
H_{2-b} : A website's e-service quality attributes related to (b) fulfillment is positively related to its perceived usefulness.	N
H_{2-c} : A website's e-service quality attributes related to (c) system availability is positively related to its perceived usefulness.	N
H₃ : The perceived usefulness of a website is positively related to website consumer-company identification.	Y
H₄ : The perceived usefulness of a website is positively related to consumers' attitude toward a website.	Y
H₅ : Website consumer-company identification is positively related to consumers' attitude toward a website.	Y
H₆ : Consumers' attitude toward a website is positively related to their intention to search for information via the website.	Y
H₇ : Consumers' intention to search for information via a website is positively related to their intention to purchase from the website.	Y

As shown in Table 12, based on the hypotheses testing, the coefficient relationships are significant for H₃ to H₇ which indicates that the relationships between latent variables are significant. However, the relationships between endogenous and exogenous variables are not as compelling: H₁ is partially supported and H₂ is not supported.

Summary

This chapter provides an analysis of the survey data, including sample description and measurement model analysis. Hypotheses were tested based on the structural model. In the next chapter, conclusions will be discussed based on the findings and implications for future research explored.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Chapter V presents the following sections: (1) Discussion; (2) Conclusions; (3) Implications; and (4) Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between website attributes (e.g., perceived attractiveness, informativeness), e-service quality (e.g., efficiency, fulfillment, system availability) and consumer-company identification for online information search and purchase behavior. More specifically, this research examined the links between consumer-company identification, perceived usefulness, and attitude toward a website, and their implications for behavioral intentions (e.g., intention to search for information and intention to purchase). Constructs were tested with an apparel website and a conceptual model was developed based on Social Identity Theory and the Technology Acceptance Model.

Four primary objectives guided the study: (1) to explore website attributes and e-service quality attributes as antecedents of consumers' perceptions of a website's usefulness; (2) to examine the relationships among website consumer-company identification, consumers' perceived usefulness of the website and consumers' attitude toward the website; (3) to investigate the relationship between online consumers' attitude toward the website and their intention to search for information; and (4) to determine whether consumers' intention to search for information is related to their intention to

purchase an apparel product from the website. The results of each of the four objectives are discussed below.

Objective 1: *Exploring website attributes and e-service quality attributes as antecedents of consumers' perceptions of a website's usefulness.*

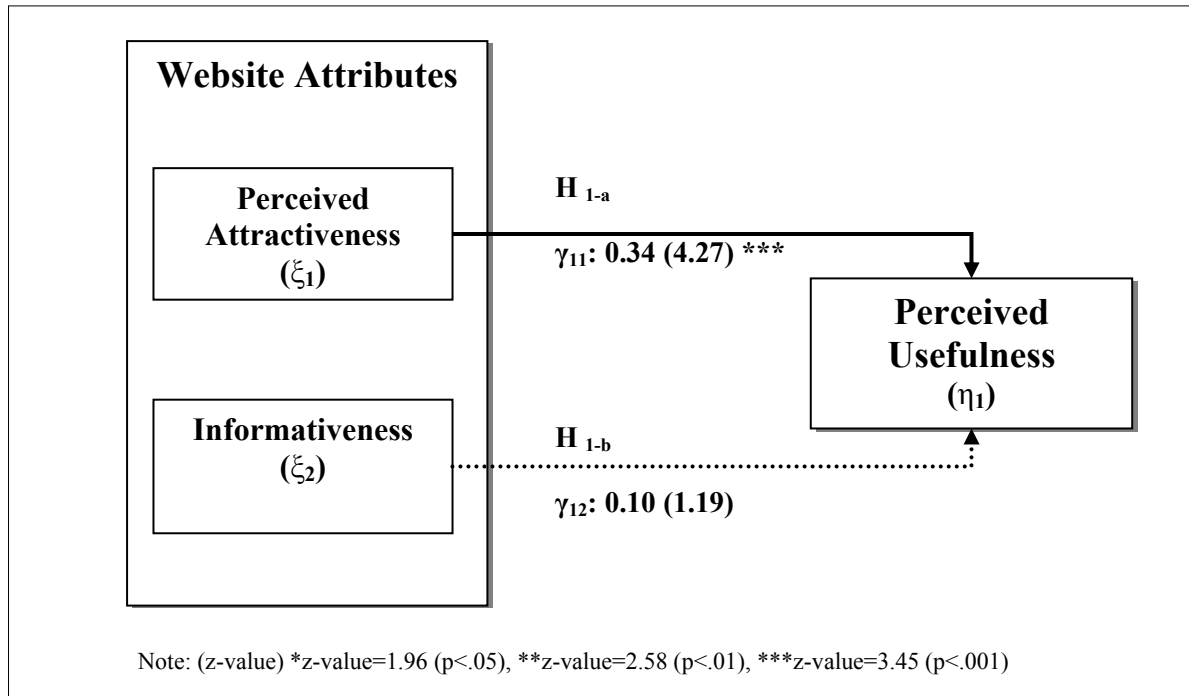


Figure 18: Website Attributes and Perceived Usefulness

Hypothesis 1: Relationship between website attributes and perceived usefulness

Hypothesis 1 proposed a positive relationship between the perceived attractiveness (H_{1-a}) and informativeness (H_{1-b}) of a website and consumers' perceived usefulness of the website (see Figure 18). Of the two, H_{1-a} was the only significant coefficient. That is, respondents indicated that they decide whether to browse a website based on perceptions of its attractiveness (e.g., design, layout, colors). This finding is consistent with a study by Seock and Norton (2008) that indicated that attractiveness was

important to perceptions of a website's usefulness. This finding also supports similar findings by Chen and Wells (1999), Moon (2004), and Song and Zinkhan (2003). The information offered by the website (e.g., context informativeness) was found to be less critical to perceptions of a website's usefulness. That is, H_{1-b} was not supported by the data. These findings suggest that in order to increase consumer's perceived usefulness of a website, an attractive layout and emphasis on visual design is relatively important. However, even though the relationship between informativeness and perceived usefulness was not significant, the availability of necessary information (e.g., price, payment procedure), forms, and instructions were important to respondents' perceptions of the website's usefulness.

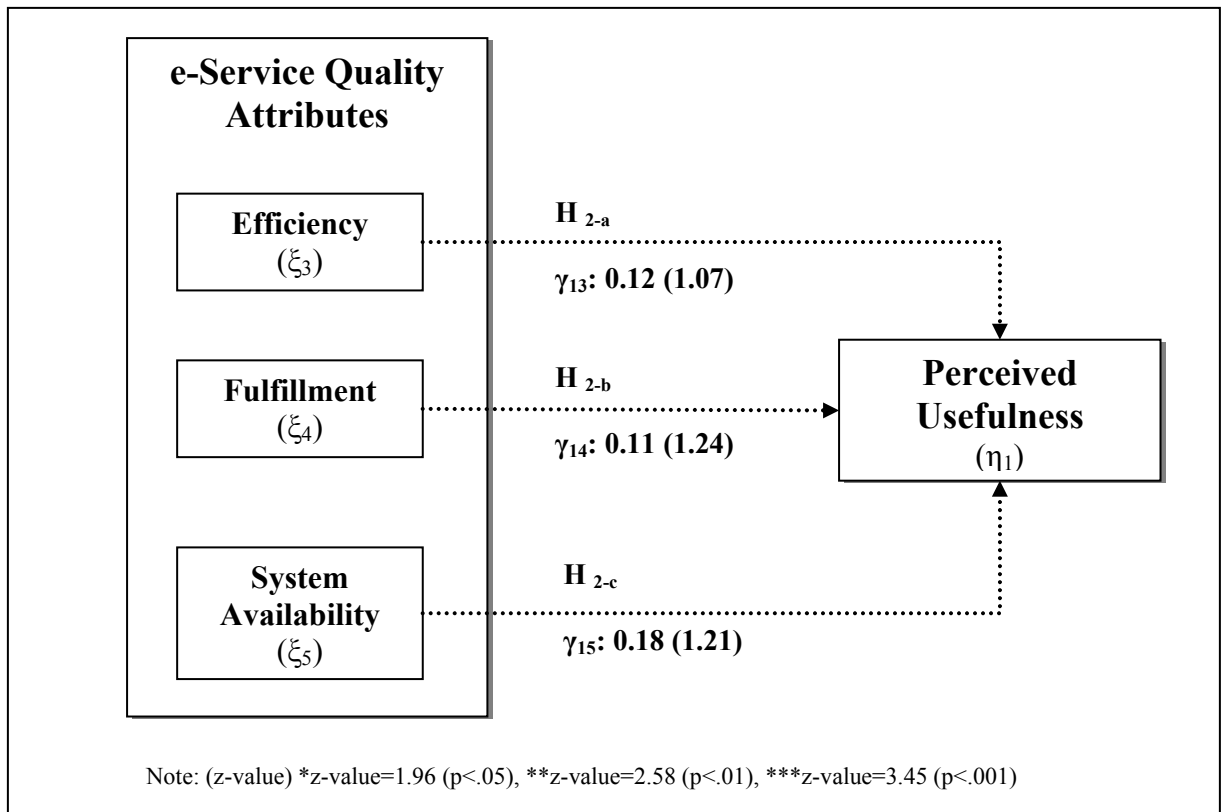


Figure 19: E-Service Quality Attributes and Perceived Usefulness

Hypothesis 2: Relationship between website e-service quality and perceived usefulness

None of the hypotheses suggesting the relationship between the three e-service quality dimensions (efficiency, fulfillment, and system availability) and perceived usefulness were significant (see Figure 19). H_{2-a}, predicting a positive relationship between efficiency and perceived usefulness, was not supported. This suggests that the degree of operational ease offered by a website, whether helping consumers to find information or to complete a transaction, may not significantly influence consumers' perceived usefulness of the website. Likewise, website information layout and loading speed did not significantly enhance respondents' perceptions of its usefulness.

Since on-time order delivery is important when shopping online, it was hypothesized that shipment notification, and package tracking would be important criteria of e-service quality. But the relationship between fulfillment and perceived usefulness (H_{2-b}) was not significant. Furthermore, H_{2-c} predicted a relationship between system availability and perceived usefulness, a relationship that was also not supported by the data. Respondents were not concerned about system function (e.g., crashing or locking out). Relative to their perceptions of the websites' usefulness, this may be because apparel can be purchased in more than one channel, and thus offers purchase alternatives. It may also be a result of the sample since respondents were university students who are comfortable with computer operation and website navigation. In addition, the survey was completed in a facility supported by the university's technical support resources, and may therefore have made such considerations seem less important to respondents.

As Balasubramanian, Konana, and Menon (2003) noted, service quality, including

its determinants with consumers' attitude and behavioral outcomes, needs further investigation, because some conventional quality dimensions may diminish its importance or become "unobservable" in online settings. According to Zhang and Prybutok (2004), service quality affects not only customer loyalty, but also perceived usefulness of online shopping. In contrast, results of this study, however, did not support a relationship between e-service quality dimensions and consumers' perceived usefulness.

Electronic commerce sites should consider providing both necessary and desired services. The Use and Gratification Theory posits that individuals use particular forms of mass communication to meet their specific needs (i.e., convenience) and consumers will be more willing to repeat an experience if these needs are gratified (Katz et al., 1973). According to Hu et al. (2009), using technology and service improvement as predictors and focusing on both service quality and intention as outcomes provides a better chance for success among technology-based services. The results of this study, however, did not support this hypothesis, and its findings differ from those of Hu et al. (2009). This study may be limited by sample size and the fact that almost 80 percent of respondents indicated that they had never purchased from the assigned website.

Objective 2: *Examining the relationships among website consumer-company identification, consumers' perceived usefulness of the website and consumers' attitude toward the website.*

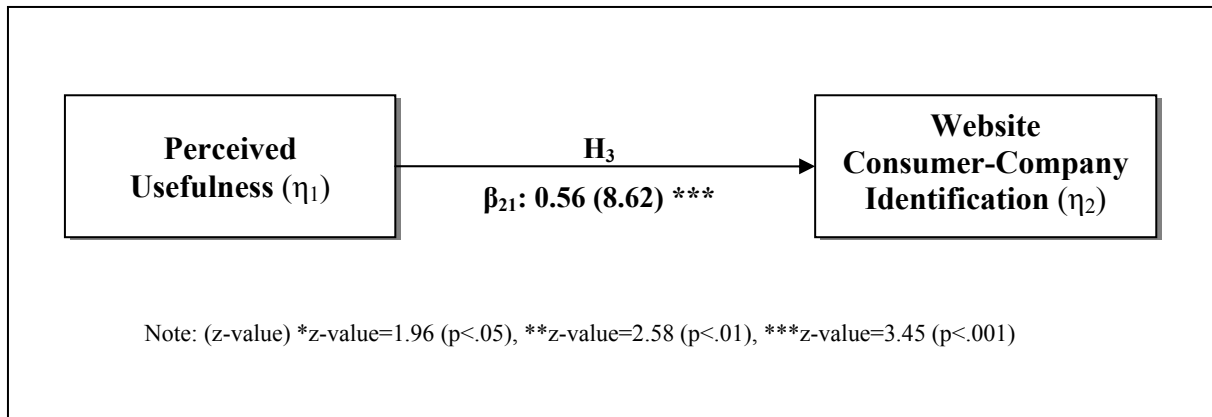


Figure 20: Perceived Usefulness and Website Consumer-Company Identification

Hypothesis 3: Relationship between perceived usefulness and consumer-company identification

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has its roots in social psychology and presents two key beliefs as predictors of intention to use a system: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis et al., 1989). In this study, perceived usefulness was predicted to impact attitude toward a website either directly or indirectly through consumer-company identification. Specifically, H_3 predicted a positive relationship between perceived usefulness and website consumer-company identification and this relationship was supported, indicating that perceived usefulness of a website can lead to identification with that website. That is, the more consumers perceive the website to be useful, the more likely it is that they will identify with the website. Interestingly, the relationship between perceived usefulness and consumer-company identification was actually stronger than the relationship between perceived usefulness and consumers' attitude toward website.

The literature suggests that consumers more easily identify and recall websites

that meet their information and service needs (Ahuja, Gupta, & Raman, 2003; Hoffman, Novak, & Peralta, 1999; Ni & Ho, 2005; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2002; Zhang & Prybutok, 2005; Zhang, Prybutok, & Huang, 2006). Similar to Brown and Venkatesh (2005), this study found that a website that is perceived to be useful attracts and sustains consumers, and in turn facilitates C-C identification. Using a website to browse actually enhances perceptions of its usefulness and leads to higher consumer-company identification with the website. According to the findings, consumer-company identification acts as a mediator between perceived usefulness and consumers' attitude toward the website. This finding fills a gap in the TAM model and suggests that perceived usefulness helps consumers to more easily identify with the website, which may contribute to a more favorable attitude toward the website.

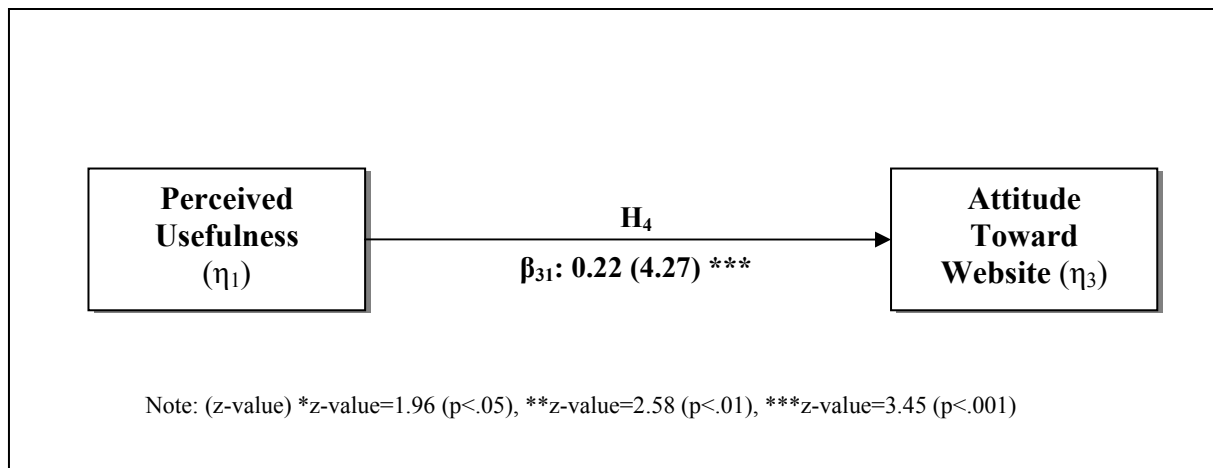


Figure 21: Perceived Usefulness and Attitude toward Website

Hypothesis 4: Relationship between perceived usefulness and consumers' attitude toward a website

This hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between perceived usefulness and attitude toward a website (H₄) and was supported (see Figure 21). These findings support those that exist in the literature, including Chen and Wells (1999), Chen et al. (2002), and Hausman and Siekpe (2009). The Use and Gratification Theory suggests that higher informativeness, entertainment, and low irritation are factors likely to generate a favorable attitude toward a website (Chen et al., 2002). This study found that perceived usefulness has a positive impact on consumers' attitude. However, perceived usefulness was related to respondents' attitudes toward the website, a similar relationship found by Agarwal and Venkatesh (2002) and Hu et al. (2009). In this study, it is possible that respondents perceived the usefulness of the assigned website based on familiarity with the store and its brand.

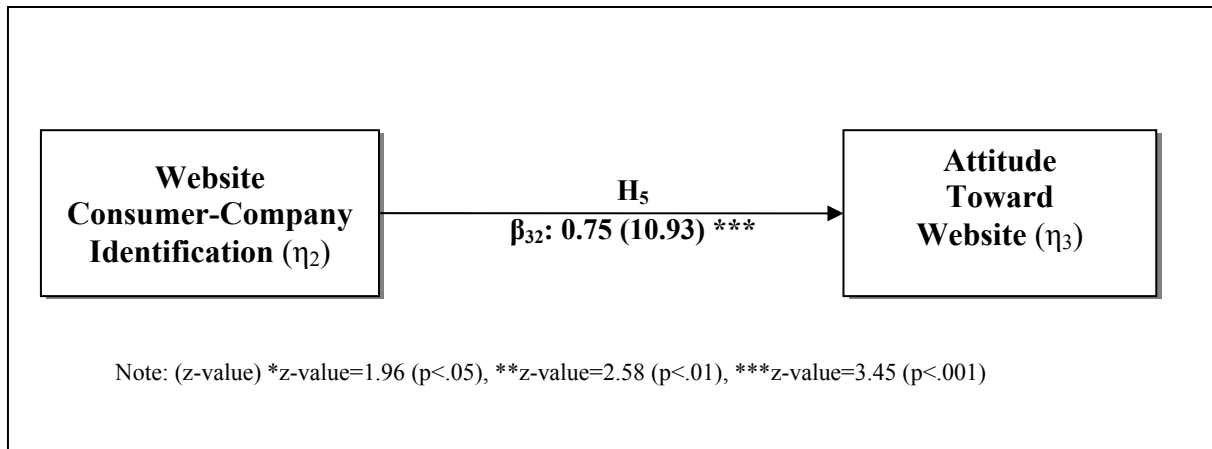


Figure 22: Website Consumer-Company Identification and Attitude toward Website

Hypothesis 5: Relationship between consumer-company identification and consumers' attitude toward a website

In H₅, a positive relationship was predicted between website consumer-company

identification and attitude toward the website. Consumer-company identification is based in part on Social Identity Theory. Social identity is defined as part of an individual's self-concept, which derives from membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). According to Social Identity Theory, individuals attempt to fit in with the group through identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Consumers have a greater tendency to purchase products or brands relevant to their self identity and they prefer to shop at stores whose organizational identities are similar to their own, also known as consumer-company identification.

This research supports the notion that a website that consumers identify with is likely the one they also have formed an attitude toward. Results are consistent with Kleine et al. (1993) and Solomon and Schopler (1982). Consumers' sense of belongingness, which facilitates consumer-company identification with the website, strengthens a positive attitude, and is then enhanced by their product or purchase experiences. In this study, consumer-company identification is linked to attitude and in fact had a stronger influence on attitude than did perceived usefulness. This result suggests that consumers identify with the company or brand more than the usefulness of its website. This study therefore suggests an alternative variable in attitude development: consumer-company identification. Causal relationships between the three constructs (perceived usefulness, website consumer-company identification, and attitude toward the website) reveal how consumers identify with a company's website if they perceive it to be useful, and that their identification with the company, in part, shapes their attitude

toward its website. This finding suggests that apparel retailers can foster positive attitudes by using the company's website as an extension of their brand image.

Objective 3: *Investigating the relationship between online consumers' attitude toward the website and their intention to search for information.*

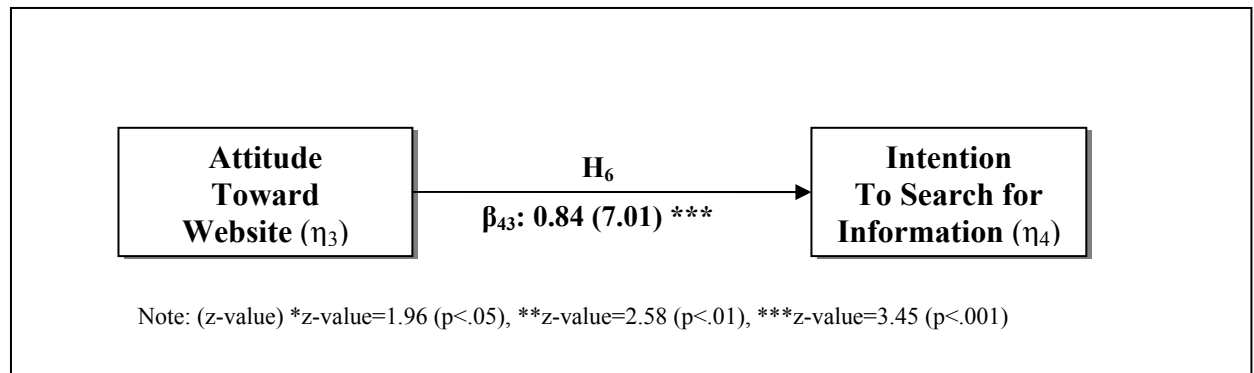


Figure 23: Attitude toward Website and Intention to Search for Information

Hypothesis 6: Relationship between consumers' attitude toward a website and intention to search for information

The relationship predicted between consumers' attitude toward the website and intention to search for information through the website (H_6) was supported. These results are similar to other research (e.g., Seock & Norton, 2007) that indicates consumers' attitudes toward their favorite clothing websites has a positive and direct effect on their intentions to search for information at those websites.

Consumers collect information and knowledge through repeat online usage (Alba & Hutchinson, 2000; Raju et al., 1995). A consumer's intention to revisit a website is recognized as a result of his/her attitude or interests in using this website (Koufaris, 2002).

This study's findings might be an indication that searching for information about apparel online is becoming increasingly prevalent among the younger generation. Findings of this study provide further support for the idea that a consumer's attitude toward a website is positively related to their intention to use it to search for information (Song & Zinkhan, 2003).

Objective 4: *Determining whether consumers' intention to search for information is related to their intention to purchase an apparel product from the website.*

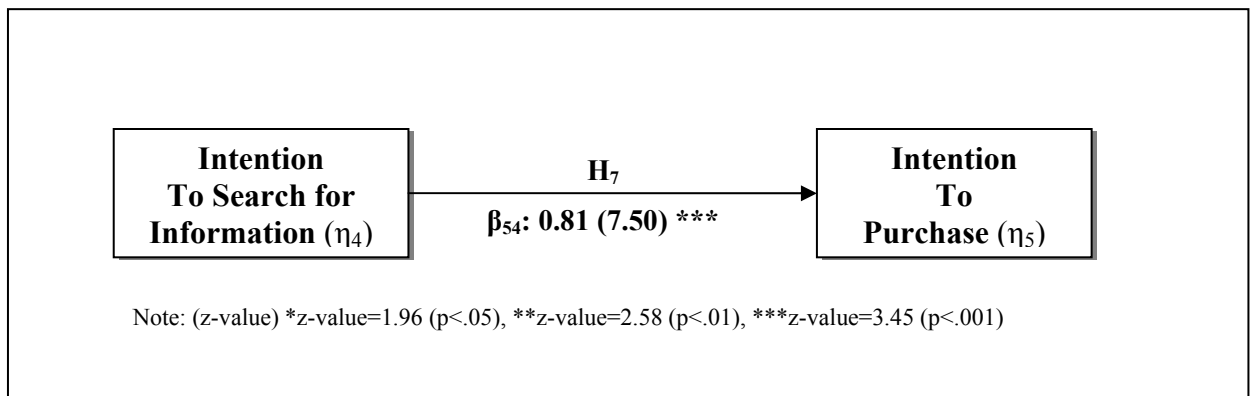


Figure 24: Intention to Search for Information and Intention to Purchase

Hypothesis 7: Relationship between consumers' intention to search for information and intention to purchase

As discussed earlier, research findings support the idea that perceived usefulness is a predictor of behavioral intention (Venkatesh et al., 2000). In this research, the relationship predicted between consumers' intention to search for information and intention to purchase through the website (H₇) was supported.

When shopping online, the quality of a product cannot be determined before purchase, so the information provided by the website is likely to influence purchase

intention (Bonn et al., 1999; Rowley, 2000; Shim et al., 2001; Watchravesringkan & Shim, 2003). With good website design (e.g., quick search functions, price comparisons, three-dimensional product presentation and colorful layout) that assists a consumer's search for product information, consumers are able to assess the quality of the product information prior to a purchase, and at the same time, to decide if the website is useful.

The findings of H₇ support the idea that consumers' intention to search for information through a website is a significant predictor of their purchase intention. This finding is consistent with Shim et al. (2001) and Watchravesringkan and Shim (2003), as both showed a significant relationship between Internet information search intention and shopping intention. However, this research further examined the relationship between consumers' intention to search for information and their intention to purchase by examining the perceived usefulness of and attitude toward a website. Results of this study support the positive relationship found between consumers' attitude and purchase intentions (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002; Riketta, 2002; Zhang et al., 2005).

Conclusions

This study was designed to provide a better understanding of the role of consumer-company identification in online consumer information search and purchase intention. The Internet was the focus because it is an important shopping channel. Findings can offer suggestions for apparel retailers to better target consumers who are using their websites to search for information and purchase apparel products.

According to the results, consumers' perceived attractiveness of a website, such as design and layout, is recognized as an important element of online retailing. Website

design was more important than either the information or service it provided. Because a website is part of a company's overall image, like a brick and mortar store, presentation encourages consumers to browse, to purchase, or to go elsewhere. Retailers therefore should focus on providing consumers with a website that showcases its products in an attractive manner, and one that is consistent with its store image.

Perhaps one of the most significant findings of this research is that consumer-company identification was an important variable related to consumers' perceived usefulness of a website and their attitude toward the website. Consumers' attitudes are not only influenced by the perceived usefulness of the website but also by their perceptions of the company (e.g., brand identity, reputation). This study indicates that consumer-company identification is mediating the relationship between perceived usefulness and consumers' attitudes toward the website, and provides a motivation for consumers to engage in information search and eventually intend to purchase.

Findings indicate a significant relationship between consumers' intention to search for information and intention to purchase. To sustain and increase competitiveness, retailers must be sure that their website is seen as a valuable tool for consumers who are searching for products and information. Today's consumers demand and expect information related to products and brands prior to purchase. An attractive website will draw the consumer in when searching. Consumers' intentions to utilize the website when searching for information therefore provides retailers a cost-effective way to acquire new consumers and to increase profits via purchases in the online channel.

Implications

This research provides insights into five issues of theoretical relevance to the online shopping literature. First, it examines the antecedents that drive consumers' intention to search for information about apparel products online. According to the findings, perceived attractiveness is a significant attribute influencing the perceived usefulness of a website. Attractiveness factors, such as color and layout, have an effect on a consumers' impression of the website. Perception of attractiveness encourages the consumer to use the website to search and purchase. Because of the uncertainty involved in online purchasing, successful websites must also take consumers' expectations of product and service quality into account.

Second, the research examined perceived usefulness and provided an understanding of how consumers evaluate a website as useful. This evaluation is positively related to their attitude toward the website. Because their attitude toward the website was positively related to intentions to use the website to search and purchase from it, it is important that retailers focus on evaluating the potential usefulness of their websites. Easy to locate product information, a color scheme that enhances its attractiveness and a layout that allows consumers to find what they are looking for can all serve to highlight the website's usefulness. Furthermore, to increase perceptions of website usefulness, websites technology can enhance consumers' virtual control over the product by presenting multiple product images or three-dimensional images. Retailers may also employ advisors and decision support technologies that interact with their consumers, either in real-time or through e-mail.

Third, this study examined the links between consumers' attitude toward a website and their intention to search and purchase products from that website. Based on the findings, most of the hypothesized relationships were supported. Supporting the TRA and TAM, however, a theoretical implication of this research is that consumer-company identification can be added to the technology acceptance process. The model developed by this study establishes relationships between perceived usefulness, attitude toward the website and consumers' behavioral intention with external constructs such as website attributes, e-service quality attributes and consumer-company identification, and thus contributes to the original TAM model. It incorporates the conceptual findings of previous TAM research with the introduction of the concept of consumer-company identification. It also empirically validates this model with regard to an apparel website.

In a practical sense, website design is important in building customer relationships, it facilitates customer support, and can change a visitor into a consumer in the online environment. To succeed, commercial websites must provide an attractive and alternative shopping channel to meet consumers' needs. Retailers should create marketing strategies that address similarities between the company's identity and that of the consumer to foster stronger consumer-company identification. That retailer's website then becomes another channel for profit maximization.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This research has a number of limitations that point to interesting opportunities for further research. First, this study relied on a pre-selected website provided to respondents. On the one hand, the study was able to examine whether respondents who

had never used it identified with the website based on their first impression with it. On the other hand, this website may not be their favorite website, or they may not be interested in the offerings of the website. Second, the research was limited by the fact that it was a single time survey and carried out in a 15-20 minute period. It is likely that different consumers need varying time durations when browsing and searching a website. Thus results may differ if respondents are given the survey to do on their own time.

Third, respondents may not have been motivated to shop on the assigned website and may prefer a website with products or brands that they identify more strongly with. Some respondents pointed out that they are not American Eagle customers. Responses therefore may have been based on preference and not solely on website design and services offered. Respondents may also have answered based on prior experience with the actual versus the online store. However, it is difficult to ignore brand effect related to apparel products, and to distinguish between a retail store and its products. Future research could integrate both brick and mortar and online channels of a retailer.

Finally, the sample size may have limited the research model's significance because ten latent variables were found within 46 research item variables. That means at least 400 respondents may be required to satisfactorily test the significance of the full structural equation model. In addition, there were some missing values (e.g., respondents could not answer survey questions about fulfillment in e-service quality without having made an actual purchase) inherent to the research design. Thus, the missing e-service quality data may have contributed to the insignificant effects found in this study. Future

research may need to incorporate several different websites or only use respondents who have purchased at the website before.

Future research should apply a three time point data collection method which could then allow application of a latent growth model. The analysis might be conducted in two steps. The first step would involve analysis of a change model of just the repeated measures variables. A change model attempts to explain the covariances and means of these variables. Given an acceptable change model, the second step would then involve adding variables to the model that could predict change over time. This could result in a better understanding of search and purchase behavior.

Multiple group analysis could be used to compare consumers' perceptual or behavioral outcomes based on demographics like gender, age, or education. Likewise, because this research used university students in similar kinds of classes as its sample, respondents' demographics were relatively homogenous. A more diverse sample would likely lead to different results. For example, students whose majors are science-related may more strongly identify with non-apparel websites (e.g., computer product websites like newegg.com). Lastly, the model developed in this study should be tested with other types of products to further examine whether perceived usefulness and attitudes are moderated by consumer-company identification and how this impacts behavioral intention.

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APPENDIX A

APPROVAL OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) FOR THE USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPATIONS IN RESEARCH

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM

Project Title: Apparel Store Identification, Consumer Search and Purchase Intention: Antecedents and consequences of online apparel retailing

Project Director: Nancy Hodges Ph.D., and Kittichai (Tu) Watchravesringkan, Ph.D.

Participant's Name: _____

What is the study about?

The objective of the study is to understand how website consumer-company identification impacts consumers' attitudes toward the website and their intentions to search and/or purchase.

Why are you asking me?

You are eligible to participate in this study because you are consumers who tend to patronize online apparel retailers.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?

If you agree to participate, your participation will involve browsing an apparel online website (American Eagle at www.ae.com). Upon finishing your online browsing, you will be asked to turn off the computer and fill out the survey related to your previous online activity. It will take 15-20 minutes to complete this study. You may choose not to answer some or all of the questions. You are allowed to work at your own pace. You may stop filling out this survey at any time you feel uncomfortable.

Is there any audio/video recording?

No.

What are the dangers to me?

There are no anticipated risks from participating in this research. The Institutional Review Board at University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses no risk to participants.

If you have any concerns about your rights or how you are being treated please contact Mr. Eric Allen in the Office of Research and Compliance at UNCG at (336) 256-1482. Questions about this project or your benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Zui-Chih (Rick) Lee by calling 336-334-5250 or sending an email at z_lee@uncg.edu.

Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?

The research benefits society by enhancing our understanding of the role of website consumer-company identification in influencing consumers' attitudes toward the website and their search and purchase intentions. In addition, the results will help practitioners to design effective websites and provide better online services to online consumers.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information confidential?

Only principal investigators and the student researcher will have access to information you provided. In order to maintain your confidentiality, neither your name nor address will be asked. Your answers will be kept confidential and anonymous. Questionnaires will be assigned an id number so that all participants remain anonymous. No link between identities to participants and the numbers will be made. The research data will be kept for 3 years in a locked filing cabinet in a locked private office on UNC-Greensboro campus, after which all documents will be shredded and computer files will be deleted. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

What if I want to leave the study?

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. Your instructor will not be aware of who participated in the study and who did not.

What about new information/changes in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Zui-Chih (Rick) Lee.

Signature: _____ Date: ____/____/2009_____

APPENDIX B
SURVEY CONSENT FORM

Research Survey

Apparel Store Identification, Consumer Search and Purchase Intention:
Antecedents and Consequences of Online Apparel Retailing

Department: Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies

Student researcher:

Mr. Zui-chih Lee, Doctoral student

Recruitment Information

- I am conducting a research project to better understand consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward online retailers.
- You are invited voluntarily participate in this study and your input is very important to my study.
- However, you can choose not to participate in this study.
- If you decide to participate in this study, you are agreeing that you are at least 18 years old.

APPROVED IRB

SEP 30 2009

Introduction

This study is designed to understand how website consumer-company identification impacts consumers' attitudes and intentions with regard to online shopping. In this study, we ask you to turn on the computer and visit online apparel store (i.e., American Eagle at www.ae.com).

Please do not spend more than 5 minutes browsing this particular website.

Three steps are involved in the study. First, you are asked to read the introduction sheet. Second, you will be browsing American Eagle's website (www.ae.com). Finally, upon finishing your online browsing, you are asked to turn off the computer and start working on the questionnaire booklet.

Thank you.

APPROVED IRB
SEP 30 2009



Dear Students:

I am a Doctoral student majoring in Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am conducting research to how website consumer-company identification impacts consumers' attitudes and intentions with regard to online shopping. Therefore, your input is important to my study.

You are invited to voluntarily participate in this study. Please take about 15 to 20 minutes to complete this study. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. Your answers will be kept confidential and anonymous. You are allowed to work at your own pace. You may stop filling out this survey at any time if you feel uncomfortable.

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask the researchers. We would be glad to assist you. In addition, if you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of North Carolina at Greensboro Institutional Review Board at 1-336-256-1482.

Sincerely,

Zui Chih, Lee
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In this survey, there are eight major sections (I, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII, and VIII). Section I presents questions about website attributes. Section II involves questions concerning online service quality. Section III consists of questions related to your perceived usefulness of the website. Section IV consists of questions related to website consumer-company identification. Section V involves questions concerning your attitudes toward the website. Section VI involves questions concerning your behavioral intentions. Section VII involves general questions concerning your online shopping experience. Section VIII consists of questions related to demographic information.

Now Please Begin !!!

Section 1: Website Attributes

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

		Strongly disagree					Strongly agree		
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1.	The layout of this website is attractive.								N/A
2.	The colors on this website are attractive.								N/A
3.	The design of this website is eye-catching.								N/A
4.	Overall, I find this website looks very nice.								N/A
5.	This website is a good source of product Information.								N/A
6.	This website supplies relevant information for my purchase decision.								N/A
7.	This website function is informative about the company's product.								N/A

Section 2: Online Service Quality

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

		Strongly disagree						Strongly agree	
1.	This website makes it easy to find what I need.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
2.	It is easy to browse anywhere on the site.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
3.	This site enables me to complete a transaction quickly.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
4.	Information at this site is well organized.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
5.	This site loads its pages fast.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
6.	This site is simple to use.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
7.	This site enables me to get on to it quickly.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
8.	This site is well organized.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
9.	This site delivers orders when promised.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
10.	This site makes items available for delivery within a suitable time frame.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
11.	It quickly delivers what I order.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
12.	It sends out exactly the items that I ordered.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
13.	It has in stock the items the company claims to have.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
14.	It is truthful about its offerings.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
15.	It makes accurate promises about delivery of products.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
16.	This site is always available for business.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
17.	This site launches and runs right away.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
18.	This site does not crash.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
19.	Pages at this site do not freeze after I enter my order information.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A

Section 3: Perceived Usefulness of the Website

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

		Strongly disagree					Strongly agree		
1.	I find this website is useful.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
2.	The website improves my shopping performance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
3.	The website enhances my shopping effectiveness.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
4.	The website increases my productivity in searching and purchasing products.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A

Section 4: Website Consumer-Company Identification

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

		Strongly disagree					Strongly agree		
1.	I strongly identify with this company/website.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
2.	I feel good about being a customer of this company/website.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
3.	I like to tell others that I am a consumer of this company/website.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
4.	This company/website image fits me well.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
5.	I feel attached to this company/website.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A

Section 5: Attitudes toward the Website

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

		Strongly disagree					Strongly agree		
1.	This website makes it easy for me to build a relationship with this company.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
2.	I am satisfied with the service provided by this website.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
3.	I feel comfortable in surfing this website.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
4.	I feel surfing this website is a good way to spend my time.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A
5.	Compared with other websites, I would rate this one as one of the best.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A

Section 6: Behavioral Intentions

Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

		Strongly disagree							Strongly agree	
1.	I would search for product information on this website before making a purchase.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A	
2.	I would search for information to confirm whether I should buy a product from this website.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A	
3.	I will definitely search product information from this website in the near future.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A	
4.	I intend to purchase through this website in the near future.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A	
5.	It is likely that I will purchase through this site.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A	
6.	I expect to purchase through this website in the near future.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	N/A	

Section 7: General Questions about Your Online Shopping Experience

- | | | Not familiar
at all | | | | | Extremely
familiar | | |
|----|---|--------------------------------|---|---|---|---|-------------------------------|---|-----|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | N/A |
| 1. | How familiar are you with this website
(www.ae.com)? | | | | | | | | |
| 2. | Have you purchased any merchandise from this website before?
___Yes ___No (If no, why: _____) | | | | | | | | |
| 3. | How many hours are you using the Internet per day? (please mark X)
____0 ____1-2 ____3-4
____5-6 ____7+ | | | | | | | | |
| 4. | How many years have you been using the Internet?
____0 ____1-2 ____3-4
____5-6 ____7+ | | | | | | | | |
| 5. | How many years have you been shopping through the Internet?
____0 ____1-2 ____3-4
____5-6 ____7+ | | | | | | | | |
| 6. | Have you ever purchased apparel or accessories online ?
___Yes ___No (If no, why: _____) | | | | | | | | |

Section 8: Demographic Information

1. Gender: ____ Male ____ Female
2. Age _____
3. Major: _____

4. Ethnicity _____

5. Year at school: _____ Freshmen _____ Sophomore
 _____ Junior _____ Senior
 _____ Graduate

6. What is your monthly income? (Including scholarships, earnings, allowances, etc.)

_____ under \$300 _____ \$300-\$499 _____ \$500-\$749
_____ \$750-\$999 _____ \$1,000-\$1,299 _____ \$1,300 and more

☺ THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS GREATLY APPRECIATED. ☺