



## **Effect of Brand Familiarity and Brand Loyalty on Imagery Elaboration in Online Apparel Shopping**

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Imagery elaboration is defined as “the activation of store information in the production of mental images beyond what is provided by the stimulus” (Babin & Burns, 1998, p. 266). When consumers virtually experience or evaluate apparel products, imagery elaboration could be evoked through various features provided by online retailers. Previous studies examined the positive effect of evoked imagery elaboration on attitudinal responses toward the brand and toward the ad in advertisements (Babin & Burns, 1998; Ellen & Bone, 1991). Due to the limitation of virtual product experience in online shopping, imagery elaboration evoked from virtual product experience may play an important role to help consumers imagine or evaluate features, functions, or usages of apparel products.

The conceptualization of elaboration, suggested by MacInnis and Jaworski (1989), was applied to explain consumers’ imagery elaboration evoked by virtual product experience in an online apparel shopping setting. MacInnis and Jaworski conceptualized processing of prior brand information influences levels of elaboration imagery processing, which ultimately influence brand attitude in the brand attitude formation process. Online consumers tend to evaluate quality and value of an apparel product using brand-related knowledge and experience, such as brand familiarity, to reduce uncertainty and unfavorable consequences of online shopping (Park & Stoel, 2005). It is assumed consumers, who are more familiar or loyal with a specific brand, may be more likely to evoke imagery elaboration, resulting in a more positive brand attitude or purchase intention to the brand. However, few studies address how prior brand-related factors, such as brand familiarity and brand loyalty, relate to imagery elaboration in online apparel shopping. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate how brand familiarity and brand loyalty relate to imagery elaboration, and, in turn, affect attitudinal and behavioral responses to the brand. Based on MacInnis and Jaworski’s information processing model, this study hypothesized that prior brand-related variables—brand familiarity and brand loyalty—increase imagery elaboration evoked through virtual product experience, which, in turn, formulates a more positive brand attitude and purchase intention online.

Using a convenience sampling method, female college students at a large Midwestern university in the U.S. were recruited for a web-based survey. A random sample of 7,000 female college students’ e-mail addresses was purchased from the Registrar’ Office and a response rate of 6% was achieved. After cleaning the data, a total of 393 responses were used for final data analysis. Participants first assessed their brand familiarity and brand loyalty toward J.Crew, which was the stimulus for the present study. When respondents visited the website, they were asked to browse various styles of only denim category for a specific time. After participants browsed the website, they evaluated imagery elaboration, brand attitude, and purchase intention

online. Established scales from previous studies were used to measure the five variables. For example, imagery elaboration was measured by the imagery elaboration scale (Babin & Burns, 1991). The internal reliabilities of the five variables were above .70, indicating a good reliability. A multiple regression analysis was conducted for data analysis using SPSS 18.0.

Results indicated brand familiarity and brand loyalty positively influenced imagery elaboration ( $\beta = .14, t = 2.83, p < .01$ ;  $\beta = .36, t = 7.28, p < .001$ , respectively). Participants, who were familiar with and loyal to the J.Crew brand, were more likely to evoke imagery elaboration through virtual product experience. That is, when participants had brand familiarity and brand loyalty, they became more interested in the denim products, more imagined what it would be like to use or wear the denim products; and more imagined the feel of the denim products on the website, after browsing the denim product from the J.Crew website. Brand attitude was positively influenced by brand familiarity ( $\beta = .16, t = 3.78, p < .001$ ), brand loyalty ( $\beta = .24, t = 5.44, p < .001$ ), and imagery elaboration ( $\beta = .46, t = 11.05, p < .001$ ). Imagery elaboration played a greater important role to enhance brand attitude after virtual product experience than brand familiarity and brand loyalty. Purchase intention online was positively influenced by brand loyalty ( $\beta = .36, t = 8.35, p < .001$ ), imagery elaboration ( $\beta = .13, t = 2.86, p < .01$ ) and brand attitude ( $\beta = .37, t = 7.586, p < .001$ ). However, purchase intention online was not influenced by brand familiarity. Imagery elaboration more greatly influenced brand attitude rather than purchase intention online.

These findings identified (1) the positive effect of prior brand-related factors—brand familiarity and brand loyalty—on imagery elaboration evoked through virtual product experience; and (2) the positive effect of imagery elaboration on both brand attitude and purchase intention in online apparel shopping. Consumers who seek more familiar and loyal brands tend to have greater imagery elaboration that induces stronger brand attitude and purchase intention online toward a specific apparel brand. Thus, this study suggests online apparel retailers or marketers should develop or establish brand reputation from their online websites and other existing channels to enhance consumers' brand familiarity and brand loyalty. More active use of prior brand-related factors—brand familiarity and brand loyalty—may also help online retailers or marketers enhance online customers' imagery elaboration, as well as their attitudinal and behavioral responses to brands.

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