

**THE ROLE OF RATIONAL AND EMOTIONAL APPEALS
ON WEBSITE PROMOTION**

Michael Lwin¹
School of Marketing, Curtin Business School
Curtin University of Technology

2009016

Editor:

Associate Professor Ian Phau
School of Marketing

**MARKETING
INSIGHTS**
Working Paper Series
School of Marketing

ISSN 1448 – 9716

¹Corresponding author:

Michael Lwin
School of Marketing, Curtin Business School
Curtin University of Technology
GPO BOX U1987
Perth, WA 6845
Australia
Tel (+61 8) 9266 9089
Fax (+61 8) 9266 3937
Email: Michael.lwin@cbs.curtin.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of rational and emotional appeals in an online context. A review of the literature revealed intangible appeals maybe more appropriate for services due to service intangibility. Using websites as cues, it compares the differences between the two appeals in the context of boutique hotels. Results indicate emotional appeals are more effective than rational appeals. Findings imply that boutique hotels should use emotional appeals online to create a point of difference, and to maximise the return from investment due to their small advertising budget. This research extends the use of emotional appeals on a new medium.

INTRODUCTION

One of the fastest growing industries to use website advertising is the hospitality sector (Gan et al., 2007). Using the internet they are able to communicate and sell their services directly. It is also one of the most competitive industries, especially in Australia having more than 5,682 accommodation services competing for a share of \$8 billion industry (ABS, 2006). For small accommodation providers such as the boutique hotel industry the task becomes even more difficult with limited advertising budget. Hence advertising online can be a cost efficient method of gaining national or even global awareness. However, lack of research in the context of boutique hotels has limited the understanding of website advertising (Dahlen et al., 2003).

Further, advertising and communication managers need to understand the ways in which consumers' behaviour have changed on the internet. To understand consumers' motives the literature describes two methods of advertising appeals that can attract consumers' attention online. The effectiveness of emotional and rational appeals has been a topic of interest for academics and practitioners. This research conducts a comparison between the two advertising appeals on the online medium for small boutique hotels.

Research by some studies have indicated emotional appeals were more effective for service related products (e.g. Batra and Ray, 1986; Olney, Holbrook, and Batra, 1991;

Stafford and Day, 1995; Bang et al., 2005; Mortimer, 2008). Services are more intangible than physical products and it would seem obvious that intangible appeal may be more important for services. On the other hand, rational appeals are advertising stimulus that supplies factual information about the brand, the product or the service that requires mental assessments of its attributes (Puto and Wells, 1984; Li, Li, and Zhao, 2009). The factual information can be a concrete cue when portraying a service quality in the advertisement. Interestingly, some researchers have indicated that rational appeals may be more important for services due to the intangible nature of services (Grove, Pickett, and LaBand, 1995; Mortimer, 2005).

More importantly, it can be argued that emotional appeals in advertising can play a significant role on the internet due to the interactive nature. Advances in technology also allow faster download and more creative use of multimedia enhancing the use of emotional appeals in the design of images and messages in the ads on the internet (Li and Leckenby, 2007). On the other hand, rational advertisement on the internet may not be effective because it is critical for websites to gain and attract attention, and interest from internet users quickly in order to build an online relationship (Geissler, Zinkhan, and Watson, 2006).

Other than the conflicting results between the two modes of advertising appeal, there are other concerns. Such as, a majority of the studies in the emotional service advertising have been based on print and television commercials. Research on the use of emotional appeals on the virtual world is limited and most studies have focused on the use of banner ads (Yaveroglu and Donthu, 2008), and pop up ads (Nysveen and Breivik, 2005). Hence, more research is needed to explore the effectiveness of the internet as an emerging advertising medium. Further, past studies (such as MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch, 1986; Lohtia, Donthu, and Hershberger, 2003) have only compared the relationship between advertising appeals and advertising effectiveness while ignoring other important constructs in the context of services' website promotion. Additionally, most investigations on service advertising have also limited themselves to professional services such as banking (Stafford, 1996).

This paper therefore strives to bridge the gaps in the literature and to aid practitioners to make more informed decisions. The main objective of this study is therefore to

examine whether emotional or rational advertising appeal is more effective for online hospitality services. Specifically, it looks at how attitudes toward websites, service expectations and attitudes toward the boutique hotels may influence purchase intention under the two different conditions of advertising appeals. This paper is organised into four sections; (1) this section consists of literature review, and model and hypotheses development. (2) The research method used in the study is discussed. (3) The findings and analysis are presented in this section. (4) The managerial implications and limitations of the study are highlighted.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Emotional Appeal

The use of emotional appeal is one of the most common strategies by advertisers to draw the audiences' attention and liking towards the brand and its products. Its aim is to arouse different array of feelings in viewers (Aaker and Stayman, 1992). Zeithaml and Bitner (1996) have explored major differences between search and experience qualities in terms of emotional appeals. They suggested goods such as cars have high search qualities as consumers can evaluate the attributes of a car before purchase. On the opposing scale services such as hotels have high experience qualities however it is more difficult to evaluate the attributes before purchase. Therefore, this poses the question if an intangible cue strategy can be more efficient than a tangible cue strategy especially for service providers such as the hospitality industry.

Shostack (1977) suggested advertising strategies based on intangible cues may be more effective for services due to the hedonic nature of consumption. Hence transformational advertisements can be a powerful tool for services that relies on experience. In fact transformational ads are more commonly used in service commercials than product commercials because of their ability to associate the experience of using the brand with a set of psychographics (Albers-Miller and Stafford, 1999; Mortimer 2008).

Further, Burke and Edell (1989) found that emotional advertising and customers' reactions to the advertisement have a direct relationship. Studies have found affect to be a powerful tool that can influence more than attitudes towards the brand (Derbaix, 1995). Researchers (such as Batra and Ray, 1986; Mortimer 2008) have also found

that emotional responses to the advertisement significantly influenced consumer's attitude towards the advertisement. More importantly, Mattila (1999) empirically proved emotional appeals are more effective than rational appeals in creating positive attitude toward service providers with limited awareness.

Emotional cues in an advertisement can improve advertisement processing (Zeitlin and Westwood, 1986) by communicating the benefits and attributes of a product or a service. That is, the emotions themselves can represent the benefits and attributes of a product or a service. Emotions such as love, desire, joy and happiness can promote a hotel's attributes such as desire, happiness and restful. In addition, emotions can improve the communication of the message. Advertisers can create peripheral processing messages (Petty and Cacioppo, 1984) to capture consumers' attention. These messages are more memorable in consumers' mind by highlighting the positive and enjoyable experiences of a service or a brand (Puto and Wells, 1984; Rossiter and Percy, 1997).

However some studies have empirically denounced the use of emotional appeal for services (e.g. Hill et al., 2004; Bang et al., 2005). Stafford and Day's (1995) research on restaurant advertisements stated that the use of rational appeals caused a greater attitude toward the advertisements. Further, Laskey, Seaton, and Nicholls (1994) research on the travel agent industry compared informative advertisements with image based advertisements and found rational appeals to be more effective. However, their research was limited to image based advertisements and thus it did not investigate a direct cause of emotional appeals.

Rational Appeal

Advertisements using rational appeals are characterised by the level of factual information being provided to consumers. An advertisement is informative if the consumer perceives the data as an important part of the ad and the data is verifiable (Puto and Wells, 1984; Zinkhan, Johnson, and Zinkhan, 1992). In addition, consumers acquire a greater ability to assess the product or the service's attributes after viewing the advertisement (Puto and Hoyer, 1990; Mortimer, 2005). Studies have suggested that the informative factor is a good predictor of advertisement likeability and brand attitude (Aaker and Stayman, 1992).

Past studies have discovered numerous factual cues that are available for advertisers (Grove, Pickett, and LaBand, 1995; Mortimer, 2008). Some of the common factual cues used by advertisers are, price, service guarantees, documentation of service performance and service availability. Puto and Wells's (1984) research confirmed that these cues meet the prerequisites required to be considered as factual information. Price cues can also act as a signal for service quality (Olson, 1977; Mortimer, 2008). Past studies have indicated it is possible to overcome intangibility and abstractness of services using tangible cues (e.g. Shostack, 1977; Pickett et al., 1993). Tangible cues can be directly or peripherally linked with a service through physical representation strategy (Berry and Clark, 1986). Tangible cues can also become part of the service firm's communication strategy and studies have discovered verbal and visual tangible cues can effectively convey service quality (Stafford, 1996; Hill et al., 2004).

Indeed, studies have indicated quality claims are used in service advertisements to reduce risks in consumers' mind (Clow, Tripp, and Kenny, 1996). In addition, factual information of a brand creates a better understanding of the brand, consequently helping consumers during the decision making process (Berry, Conant, and Parasuraman, 1991; Mortimer 2005). Advertisements using informative appeals can transform intangible features of a brand into physical features. For example a hotel can portray a service quality image (intangible attribute) by displaying the accolades that the hotel has attained.

Stafford (1996) found documentation had a positive effect on repurchase intentions for experiential services (i.e. hotels and restaurants). It is also identified that the effectiveness of documentation of excellence strategy is depended on the type of service environment. This proposition is also supported by various studies suggesting that consumers will pay more attention to information when consumption of products and services involve pleasure, fun or enjoyment (such as Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Stafford and Day, 1995; Mattila, 1999; Mortimer 2005).

However the actual use of factual information in service advertising still remains unclear. Numerous studies have conducted the content analysis of factual cues in service advertisements. However it is still unclear whether service advertisements

contain more information than goods (Abernethy and Franke, 1996; Tripp, 1997). For the reasons it is difficult to determine whether factual or emotional cues are more effective in service advertising.

Attitude towards Websites

The internet has proved to be an effective advertising medium (Brackett and Carr, 2001; Yoon and Kim, 2001) and more organisations are introducing the web as part of their advertising strategy (Hollis, 2005). Advertising through the web represents many opportunities for small services to gain national or global recognition using a limited budget.

Studies have indicated websites could be used to persuade, inform or remind customers about a company's services and offerings (Hairong, Daugherty, and Biocca, 2002). It is difficult to gain and attain customers' attention and interest on the websites due to sheer number of websites advertising through search engines (Geissler, Zinkhan, and Watson, 2006). Since it is important to attain and gain customers' attention and interest on websites, it is vital to make a strong first impression (Watson, Zinkhan, and Pitt, 2000). Geissler, Zinkhan, and Watson (2006) suggested advertisers and web designers need to provide adequate levels of information and images. Valuable information and eye-catching graphics on the homepage is the key to a positive influence on purchase intentions and consumer attitudes. Homepages using emotional appeals are more likely to contain pictures, while facts and figures are more likely to appear on homepages using rational appeals.

The internet allows potential buyers to seek out information from various sources such as advertisers, retailers and third party sites to identify which service brand best satisfy their needs (Hollis, 2005). In addition, individuals do actively seek information to help make a purchase and relevant information to their purchase decision was sought from web and other sources (Hollis, 2005). These suggestions imply rational appeal maybe a better predictor of purchase intention since the websites are providing consumers with the important information they have been seeking for.

Service Expectations

Consumption of services is unique due to the dynamic nature of services (Solomon et al., 1985). Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry (1993) provided a model for 'total

service experience' suggesting that a consumer's 'total service experience' consisted of three stages, pre-consumption, consumption and post-consumption. Research also suggests that customers' past experience and familiarity can influence service expectation of the service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1985; Webb, 2000). In addition, Burke and Edell (1989) study also showed there is a positive correlation between a customer's previous brand attitudes and attitudes towards the advertisement. Similarly, Mattila (1999) indicated that message strategies based on price is not an effective strategy when customers have low prior experience and familiarity about the brand. However, in order to understand the effect of service expectations, one can only measure 'expectations formed' which exists between pre-consumption and consumption stages of 'total consumption experience'. Therefore prior experience and familiarity of a brand must be controlled so as to not influence a customer's expectation of service quality.

Attitude towards Boutique Hotels

Attitude towards the service provider is defined as, a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner towards the sponsoring organisation (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch, 1986). Mattila (1999) indicated that an emotional message strategy received a stronger positive attitude toward the service provider than a rational message strategy. Other studies on effectiveness of emotional appeal also suggest attitude towards the service provider can be enhanced by emotional cues (Batra and Ray, 1986; Olney, Holbrook, and Batra, 1991; Derbaix, 1995).

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The ultimate aim of this study is to empirically show evidence that emotional appeals are more effective than rational appeals for experiential service providers (i.e. hotels) advertising online. A review of the literature verified a large portion of emotional advertising was dedicated to traditional media such as print and television advertisements (e.g. Batra and Ray, 1986; Mattila, 1999; Mortimer, 2008). The advertising effectiveness of advertisements using emotional and rational appeals is unclear and at best contradictory.

Mattila (1999), the most recent researcher looking at both types of advertising appeals have used four constructs namely, attitude towards the advertisement, attitude towards the company, service expectation and purchase intention to measure the relative advertising effectiveness (Stafford and Day, 1995; Stafford, 1996). However in the context of the hospitality industry specifically boutique hotels, purchase intention is proposed as the dependent variable since ultimate aim of any advertising strategy is to sell products and services. Purchase intention will indicate the ability of each message strategy to evoke purchase behaviour. The overarching objective of this research is to compare the two types of appeals hence the first hypothesis proposed that:

H₁: Boutique hotel websites using emotional appeals will have a stronger positive effect on purchase intention than advertisements using rational appeals.

In the same vein, it is also expected that attitude towards the website, service expectation and attitude towards the service provider would differ significantly between hotel websites using emotional and rational appeals. As such, the following hypotheses are presented:

H_{2a}: There is a significant difference between websites using rational and emotional appeals on consumers' attitude towards websites.

H_{2b}: There is a significant difference between websites using rational and emotional appeals on consumers' service expectations.

H_{2c}: There is a significant difference between websites using rational and emotional appeals on consumers' attitude towards boutique hotels.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Pre-tests

A focus group was conducted to identify and categorise hotel websites evoking specific advertising appeals. A pack of eighteen website homepages of boutique hotels was printed and distributed to the group. This study has chosen low profile boutique hotel websites to control for familiarity. Past experiences of a service provider may affect service expectations (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1993). The participants were then asked to separate all the prints into three separate groups representing rational, emotional or other appeal strategies. The participants acted as a

group and they had to discuss and explain the reasons for their choice. Only eleven hotel websites were classified as either rational or emotional appeal strategies which formed the basis for the second pre-test.

A new group of participants made up the second pretest to conduct a short self-administered survey based on the eleven websites. The aim of this task was to identify two websites evoking rational appeals and two websites evoking emotional appeals. Participants were shown a print copy of the eleven websites randomly one at a time. They then responded to the survey which consisted of four statements. Participants were asked how strongly they agree or disagree with each statement on a seven point scale. The mean score of the eleven websites was computed. The analysis demonstrated Grace Hotel and Richmond Hill Hotel were the best indicators for “service accolade” and “price cue” which are factual cues for rational appeals respectively. Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort and Spa and Hotel Lindrum were the best indicators of emotional appeals for the dimensions of “serenity” and “warmth” respectively.

Data Collection and Procedure

Data were collected using a systematic intercept approach in the central hub of a large suburb in Western Australia. Respondents were approached by trained researchers over two weekends at different times of the day and at different locations to minimise bias selection. Respondents were asked for 10-15 minutes of their time to complete the short survey and were given every opportunity to refuse to participate in the research. Respondents who agreed to the survey were asked to imagine that they were planning for a weekend getaway and that they were deciding on the choice of a boutique hotel in an Australian holiday resort. They were then asked to spend a few minutes examining web pages of a boutique hotel. Following that, they were asked to complete a two page survey form.

Survey Instrument

The self-administered questionnaire comprised of four sections. The first section consisted of three coloured printed web pages of one of the four boutique hotels chosen by the focus group. In the second section, they were asked to respond to a number of scales including familiarity with the website (single item bipolar scale),

attitude towards websites (four item bipolar scale adapted from Mattila, 1999), level of service expectations (three item bipolar scale adapted from Mattila, 1999), attitude towards boutique hotels (three item bipolar scale adapted from Peterson, Wilson and Brown, 1992) and purchase intention (four item scale adapted from MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch, 1986). The third section comprised of two sets of manipulation checks for the respective appeals. Scale items from Holbrook and Batra's (1987) dimensions on standardised emotional profile (SEP) for the dimension of "warmth" (items consisting of tender, warm hearted and sentimental) and "serenity" (items consisting of restful, serene and relaxation) were used to measure emotion. It was measured by a seven bipolar semantic differential scale. This scale should indicate a higher score for websites using emotional appeals compare to websites using rational appeals. Numerous studies have indicated intangible qualities of services can be overcome by using tangible factual cues such as price and documentation of service excellence (service accolades) (Mattila, 1999). The purpose of this scale is to measure how informative each boutique hotel's website is. Websites using emotion appeals should score a lower average on both items compare to websites utilising rational appeals. The final section collected demographic profiles of the respondents.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Sample

A total of 320 surveys were collected. A total of 71 questionnaires had to be removed due to a number of reasons such as incomplete entries and some which showed no interest in the survey (i.e. donkey voting) by selecting one choice for the entire questionnaire. After data cleaning a total of 249 questionnaires were deemed fit for data analysis. The sample was mainly represented by young adults under 30 (60.8%), males (62%) and in the middle income group (56.3 %).

Manipulation Checks & Scale Reliability

Results from the manipulation checks showed very low level familiarity for the four boutique hotels. Hotel Lindrum was the least familiar brand with a mean of 1.44, The Grace Hotel scored a mean of 1.45, Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort and Spa scored a mean of 1.49 and Richmond Hill Hotel scored a mean of 1.92. (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very well). Websites utilising emotional appeals scored a significantly higher mean (mean = 5.13) than websites utilising rational appeals (mean = 4.23). As expected,

websites utilising rational appeals scored a higher mean (4.19) than websites utilising emotional appeal (3.37).

The Cronbach's alpha for Attitude towards websites ($\alpha = 0.868$), service expectations ($\alpha = 0.682$), attitude towards Boutique hotels ($\alpha = 0.818$), purchase intentions ($\alpha = 0.923$) and emotional appeal ($\alpha = 0.868$) are all deemed acceptable for analysis.

Hypothesis One

The four advertising cues namely service accolades, price, warmth and serenity were regressed against purchase intentions. The results reflect that serenity and warmth are two significant predictors of purchase intention. However websites based on service accolade ($p = .134$) and price ($p = .052$) did not show a relationship that predicted purchase intentions (See Table 1). As predicted the results suggest advertisements using emotional appeals are a stronger predictor of purchase intention than advertisements using rational appeal for boutique hotels. The first hypothesis postulates that emotional appeal is expected to be a more efficient predictor of purchase intention than rational appeal. The two boutique hotel websites utilising emotional appeals showed a strong relationship with purchase intention (Sig value = .000 and .000, t-value = 4.338 and 6.386) but on the other hand, boutique hotel websites utilising rational appeals showed no significant relationship with purchase intention (Sig value = .134 and .052, t-value = 1.502 and 1.949). Hence emotional appeals are a stronger predictor of purchase intention, as the result H_1 was accepted. These results supported the findings from Zinkhan, Johnson, and Zinkhan (1992), Cutler and Javalgi (1993) and Mattila (1999).

Table 1: Regression Analyses of Advertising Appeal on Purchase Intention

Advertising Cues	Beta	t-value	Sig-value
Service Accolades (R1)	.057	1.502	.134
Price (R2)	.073	1.949	.052
Warmth (E1)	.243	4.338	.000*
Serenity (E2)	.354	6.386	.000*

Dependent variable = Purchase intention

* Significant at $p < .05$, $R^2 = .339$

Hypothesis Two

Independent t-Test analysis was administered to measure the relative differences between rational and emotional appeals for attitude towards websites, service expectations and attitude towards boutique hotels. Table 2 reflects the results. The four different advertising appeals (service accolades, price, warmth, serenity) were grouped into two variables (rational and emotional). The rational variable was specified as a “group 1” and the emotional variable was specified as “group 2”. The results showed there is a significant difference in consumers attitude towards websites using rational and emotional appeals (Sig. value = .034). As such, H_{2a} will be accepted. However the results indicated that there is no significant difference in service expectations as well as the attitudes towards hotels between websites using rational and emotional appeals (Sig. value = .480). Hence it can be concluded that H_{2b} and H_{2c} are rejected.

Table 2: t-Test analysis of attitude towards the website, service expectations of the service provider and attitude towards the hotel and rational and emotional appeal

Independent Variable	Rational Appeal Mean	Emotional Appeal Mean	Sig. value	F-value
Attitude towards the website	4.38	5.30	.034*	4.539
Service expectation	4.61	4.89	.480	.501
Attitude towards the service provider	4.56	5.27	.176	1.836

*Significant at 95% confidence

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Conceptual and Managerial Contributions

This study has provided some empirical evidence to state that emotional appeals are more effective than rational appeals for hospitality services advertising online.

Specifically, websites using emotional appeals tend to show a positive relationship between attitude towards hotels and attitude towards websites, and purchase intention.

This study has broadened the scope of service advertising literature by exploring the role of emotions on a new advertising medium. Past studies have shown emotional appeals were more effective than rational appeals in traditional media such as television and print (e.g. Batra and Ray, 1986; Mattila, 1999; Hill et al, 2004). The result indicated online advertisements utilising emotional appeals showed a stronger relationship in predicting purchase intention than advertisements utilising rational appeals and it further strengthened the concept proposed by other scholars (Batra and Ray, 1986; Mattila, 1999; Mortimer 2008).

Furthermore, researchers were obsessed with measuring the relationship between advertising effectiveness for various appeals, and they have not explored the differences between rational and emotional appeals on website promotions. Batra and Ray (1986), Derbaix (1995), Olney, Holbrook, and Batra (1991) and Mattila (1999), are some examples of studies that only focused on measuring the relationships. Hence this study confirmed advertisers' belief by elucidating the differences that existed between rational and emotional appeals for attitude towards the website and attitudes towards the boutique hotels.

Internet as an advertising medium offers many advantages over the traditional mediums and hence it's importance is growing among advertisers. The ultimate aim of this research was to show advertising utilising emotional appeals can be as effective online as it is offline. Since advertising online is cheaper than television and print advertising it is an attractive alternative. However, internet users are meticulous (Singh and Dalla, 1999) and on average only spend around 30 seconds on each website. Thus it is crucial to create a positive first impression to gain and attain consumers' attention and interest (Geissler, Zinkhan, and Watson, 2006). Results from the study have indicated emotional advertisements are better at gaining and attaining interest and attention. Further, attitude towards the website utilising emotional appeals had a stronger relationship with purchase intention. Hence, it makes sense for service advertisers to choose emotional appeals when they are

advertising online. Results from the study demonstrate how efficiency obsessed advertisers can save on cost and maximise the effectiveness of internet advertising.

Cost efficiency is particularly important for small boutique hotels due to a limited advertising budget. This research explored how small boutique hotels can maximise the effectiveness of two advertising appeals on the web. Hence, it will give managers and advertisers greater knowledge on relative efficiencies when advertising online. The internet is a cost effective and global medium, it becomes even more important for small boutique hotels to maximise the awareness from the online campaign.

In addition, they cannot afford to compete against multi-national hotel chains based on price due to their small size. However, being small and boutique can also be highly advantageous. Since these boutique hotels are small in size they are able to provide a superior service, hence they can differentiate on these unique experiences. As a result, emotional appeals can portray the unique experience online and this will assist a boutique hotel differentiate itself from its competitors. For these reasons emotional advertising on the internet can be highly beneficial for small boutique hotels.

Future Research Directions

Due to a small sample size and sampling methods, the results from the research has limited generalisation. Future researchers should aim for a larger and a more controlled sample to increase the reliability and validity of the results. This research has only studied on the relationship between purchase intention and two emotional cues, warmth and serenity (Holbrook and Batra, 1987). The research has also limited to the relationship between purchase intention and two rational cues namely price and service accolades. Future studies should test the relationship between purchase intention and other emotional and rational cues. In addition, future scholars may look to test whether negative and positive emotional cues have an effect on purchase intention online. Finally, to collect the data, the service providers' homepage was printed on a standard A4 paper. Hence it does not represent the full web experience. The print copies of the websites cannot capture the animations and the sounds from the websites. As the result an online survey may be more appropriate to capture the entire web experience.

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