

## **Unreal results: The case for pilot testing**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study reports the results of a pilot survey originally intended to validate a survey instrument investigate various strategies for measuring trust and risk within the context of consumer e-tail websites. Towards this end, brand familiarity and experience were measured as control variables. The study found that although the name for a “low familiarity” brand was made-up and completely fictitious, a significant number of respondents reported having heard of the company, and a few indicated that they had actually visited the company’s store. The results demonstrate the need for pilot testing to confirm construct validity.

### **KEYWORDS**

Pilot testing, familiarity, construct validity

## INTRODUCTION

Familiarity is a broad term that is often associated with other constructs such as consumer experience, consumer expertise, and consumer knowledge (Ha and Perks, 2005; Hoch and Deighton, 1989). Previous studies have found significant relationships between brand familiarity and consumer perceptions. (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Ha 2004; Ha and Perks 2005). Specifically, Park and Stoel (2005) found a significant relationship between brand familiarity and perceived risk. Consumers often determine familiarity based upon a company's name. Gregg and Walczak (2008), found that the "professionalism" of the name of a vendor was positively related to prices paid for products in an on-line auction setting (Gregg and Walczak, 2008).

## METHODOLOGY

As part of a study investigating the reliability of common strategies of measuring trust and perceived risk, two experimental webpages were developed. One of the experimental webpages was intended to represent the website of a "highly familiar" brand. For this website, the best Best Buy brand was chosen. A second experimental webpage was also created. This second webpage was intended to represent the website of an unfamiliar brand. For this webpage, the fictional brand "MyPC" was created and used. At the time of the experiment, web searches did not find websites or information pertaining to any stores or companies called "MyPC". This unknown name was created to appear to be plausible without using real vendor, brand and product names, thus reducing brand equity. All content and design features for the 2 experimental sites were held constant except for the brand names of the vendor (Best Buy or MyPC). Both experimental webpages were "modeled" to look like a web page from the Best Buy website. Examples of the experimental website are shown in Appendix A, Figures 1 and 2.

For the purposes of the study, it was assumed that consumer familiarity with a brand would correspond with consumer trust in the website and consumer perceptions of the risk associated with transacting with the website. To verify this, two pilot tests were conducted prior to the main data collection. The first pilot test was administered to 144 undergraduate students, with a response rate of 60%. Subjects were asked to visit one of the experimental websites, which presented an online storefront with a single product available for consideration.

Upon completion of viewing the website, subjects were instructed to return to the survey website. Survey items examined subjects' familiarity with the vendor and brand presented by the website. The purpose of the pilot test was to establish brand equity with BestBuy and MyPC.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the initial pilot study (see Appendix B, Table 1) indicated that MyPC was not as unknown or unrecognizable as we preferred. Indeed, despite the fact that the name MyPC was completely fictitious, 30% of respondents indicated that they had heard of the brand name, 20% indicated they had seen advertising for the brand, 7% of respondents indicated they had been to a physical store, and 14% indicated they had visited the fictitious company's website.

The authors suppose that the overall generic nature of the MyPC name meant that students inferred familiarity with the company even though it was completely fictitious. Whatever the reason for the anomaly, the authors deemed this reported level of familiarity unacceptable. A second name, "A2B Tek", was created, and the experimental website was altered to display the new name (see Appendix A, Figure 3). The second pilot test was conducted, and the same survey was administered to 85 undergraduate students. The results of the second pilot study (see Appendix B, Table 2) indicated that familiarity with the A2B Tek name was considerably less than with the MyPC name (although one participant still indicated they had been to a physical store of the made-up company). Results for familiarity with A2B Tek were deemed acceptable.

The results of this study demonstrate the need for pilot testing to confirm construct validity.

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APPENDIX A

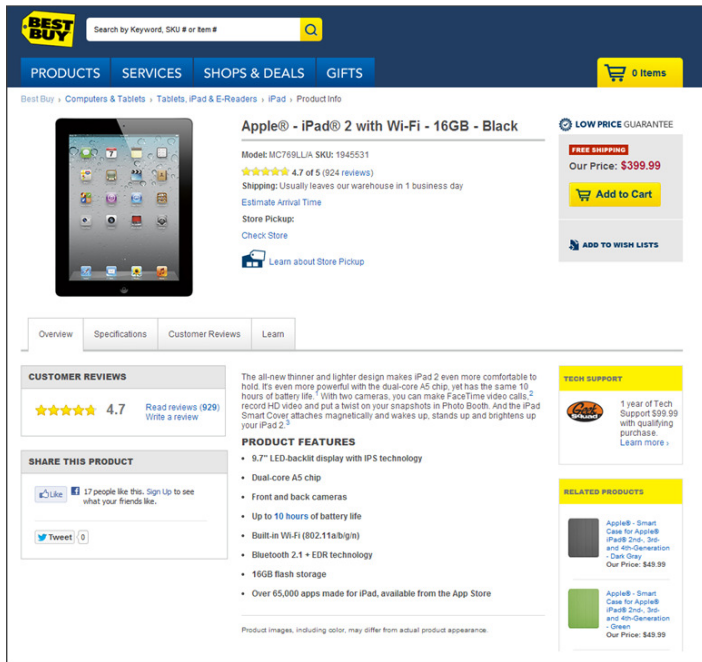


Figure 1: The high familiarity “Best Buy” version of the experimental webpage.

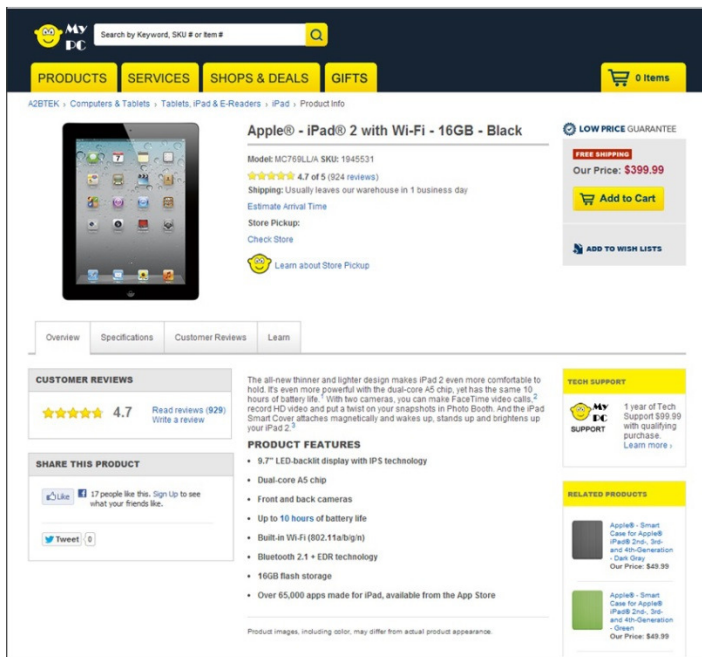


Figure 2: The original low familiarity “MyPC” version of the experimental webpage.

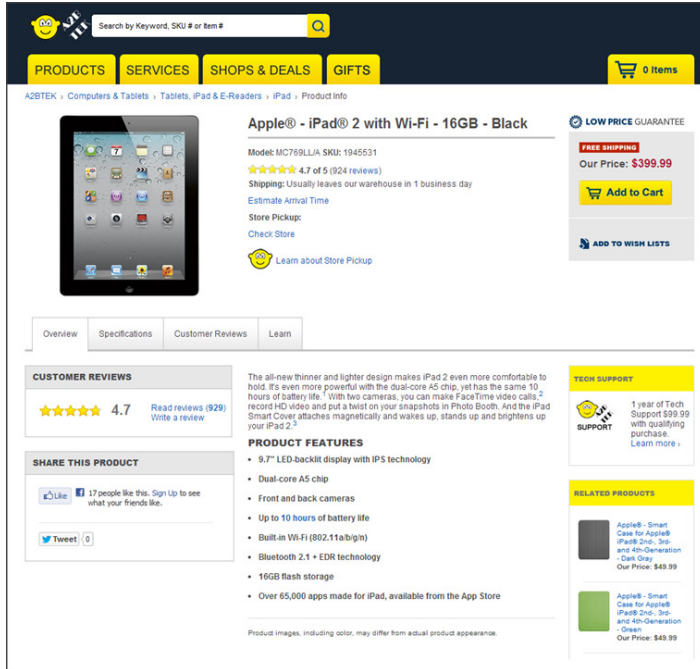


Figure 3: The final low familiarity A2B Tek version of the website.

## APPENDIX B

Table 1: The results of the first pilot test.

<b>Survey Item</b>	<b>Number of Responses Indicating Agree or Strongly Agree</b>
I have heard of the vendor shown in this website, MyPC.	13 (30%)
I have seen ads or articles on MyPC products.	9 (20%)
I have been to a physical MyPC store.	3 (7%)
Before this exercise, I was familiar with the My PC website.	6 (14%)

Table 2: The results of the second pilot test.

<b>Survey Item</b>	<b>Number of Responses Indicating Agree or Strongly Agree</b>
I have heard of the vendor shown in this website, A2B Tek.	4 (9%)
I have seen ads or articles on A2B Tek products.	3 (7%)
I have been to a physical A2B Tek store.	1 (2%)
Before this exercise, I was familiar with the A2B Tek website.	1 (2%)