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**Visual aesthetics of the homepage of web sites of Brittany islands:
an exploratory study on the impact on the intention to visit**

Leïla Damak

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In a context of increased competitiveness, local and regional authorities are constrained to adopt an economic model close to that of private companies in order to enhance the specific character of their image. They have to promote their attractiveness to influence their publics - tourists, citizens, firms-. Academic work on territorial marketing as a tool for strategic development of a nation, a region, a department, a municipality, a city have developed in the late 1990s (Kotler & al., 1993) and led researchers to apprehend the territory as a trademark tourist's destination.

The image of a tourist destination is an overall assessment that is decisive for the formation of preferences and for the choice of tourist destination (Jenkins, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Bartikowsky & al., 2008). The website is today an essential strategic tool, both from the point of view of the local community and that of the visitor. From the local community point of view, it aims to express and value the identity of the place through the cultural and tourist offer, to increase its visibility and to increase its attractiveness. This involves a strategy based on a strong and unifying identity concept constituted by values, a message, a signature - analogously to a brand - through the opportunities and richness to be valued. From the visitor point of view, the web becomes the unavoidable information tool to prepare holidays, contributes to the choice of a tourist destination (Oued Oubey & Zaiem, 2009) and represents a travel booking tool for almost two thirds of the French. But the web is also a source of satisfaction and pleasure (Lavie & Tractinsky, 2004).

In addition to its utilitarian value, visiting the web site of a place can be considered a real emotional experience full of emotions and affectivity. Visitors who are satisfied with their overall experience of visiting a branded site are more likely to revisit and recommend the site and are more willing to develop a favorable attitude towards the brand and to express future purchasing intentions (Flores & al., 2008).

However, a single bad experience can create a break in the relationship. The consumer can permanently abandon the site (Chang & al., 2002). If each of the components of a site - content, structure (clarity-ergonomics), navigation (speed of display) and representation (aesthetics) contribute to the formation of the brand identity and satisfaction with the site, we focus our research on the visual aesthetic factors of the home page for two main reasons: 1) Visual elements are particularly important for the site because most of the content and interactivities proposed are conveyed through visual stimuli. The aesthetics of the site contribute to the practicality and readability of the content (Tractinsky & al., 2000; Kim & al., 2003). Professionals estimate a 20% increase in attendance after redesigning the aesthetics of a site; (2) Visual factors have a more direct and instantaneous effect on visitor impressions than structural or navigational factors (Tractinsky & al., 2006, Norman, 2002, 2004, Kim & al., 2003).

The first impression of users comes from the visual factors perceived on the home page and determines the image (Schenkamn & Jonsson, 2000). It can have a very important impact on how visitors perceive the site and the trace it will leave in their memory.

The term "aesthetics" comes from the Greek word *aesthesis*, which refers to sensory perception and understanding or sensual knowledge. Although the aesthetic term has been apprehended from many disciplines (philosophy, art, epistemology, psychology,...), we will consider a broad conception in

which the aesthetic is defined as "the science of beauty". It refers to judgments, emotions, linked to the beauty of the external physical appearance of men, nature, environment, architecture, objects. Its influence on interaction has been recognized since antiquity. In marketing, it is widely accepted that aesthetics - particularly through design - plays an important strategic role, even essential in the development of a product (Bloch, 1995), a brand, a retail and influences consumer behavior. The aesthetics researches in the field of man-machine interaction recently developed can be extended in the field of territorial collectivities in France.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the importance of attitude towards the aesthetics of a home page and its determinants on the behavioral responses of potential visitors to a local community. The application domain of the web sites of the Brittany islands is justified by the strategic challenge that these places represent in terms of tourism attractiveness of the Brittany region, the awareness of web designers of increased professionalism expected by Internet users and therefore the need to develop academic research that is lacking to date.

The theoretical framework is based on three research questions (see Figure 1) and justifies our research hypotheses: 1) the importance of the visual aesthetics of the homepage of the website as a place of identity expression of a territorial community; 2) the physical aesthetic characteristics - the design factors - of a home page that make it possible to reflect the identity of the place; (3) the impact of the perception of the aesthetics of the home page on the visitor's affective and behavioral responses.

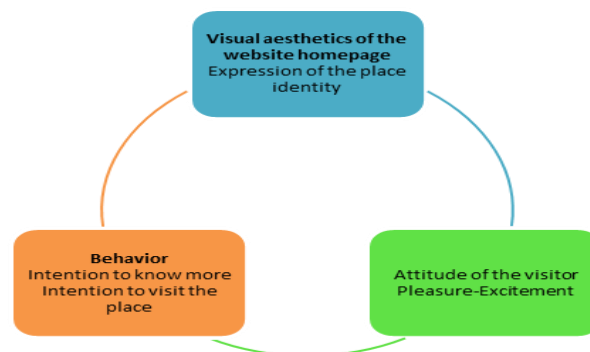


Figure 1. Research Issues

To justify our purpose, an exploratory study on a sample of 250 consumers is conducted and focuses on the perceptions of the aesthetics of the web pages of 8 Brittany islands and their Influences on attitudinal and behavioral responses. Following the presentation of the results, we conclude on the theoretical and managerial implications, the limits and future researches.

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