



Chapter 10

Tactile Sensations in E-Retailing: The Role of Web Communities

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ABSTRACT

Previous research universally recognized the pivotal role of touch in consumer behavior and considered it as one of the critical factors limiting the adoption of online shopping. In fact, in digital environments, consumers can rely only on the product visual representation and/or written descriptions of its characteristics. Starting from this evidence, several authors have underlined how the provision of a description of a product's tactile characteristics may positively affect consumer behavior. However, previous contributions have devoted little attention to the differential influence of online sources of information on consumers' willingness to buy when a description of a product's tactile characteristics is provided. The research presented in this chapter aims to cover this gap, by demonstrating through two experimental studies that, when a description of the tactile characteristics of the product is provided, the information given by the users of a web-community increases consumer's willingness to buy the product.

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INTRODUCTION

Product touch, as direct tactile experience with a product, is very important in determining consumers' evaluations and purchasing decisions (McCabe and Nowlis, 2003). Indeed, touching a product prior to purchase allows consumers to acquire information on its material properties (i.e., texture, weight, temperature, and hardness – Lederman and Klatzky, 1987) that cannot be obtained through visual inspection (Lindauer, Stergiou and Penn, 1986), thus enhancing confidence in their evaluations and choices. This is a highly relevant issue if considering that the inability to physically examine products on the computer screen is still a key deterrent to online shopping (Lee and Park, 2014). Such inability can generate uncertainty about product performance that, in turn, can produce a delay in purchasing decisions (Greenleaf and Lehmann, 1995). Consumers may hesitate to shop online and finally buy the product in a physical store (Cho, Kang and Cheon, 2006).

Despite being unable to experience the tactile contact with products in digital environments, consumers can rely on visual representations and/or written descriptions of products characteristics (Mooy and Robben, 2002). As a consequence, several studies have underlined how providing vivid information is crucial when presenting a product online (Coyle and Thorson, 2001), because it has the potential to bring consumers closer to the direct experience (Nowlis, Mandel and McCabe, 2004), thus improving their understanding of products and their attitudes (Li, Daugherty and Biocca, 2003). Previous literature shows that, when direct contact with a product is absent, the provision of a description of a product's tactile characteristics may positively affect consumer behavior (e.g., McCabe and Nowlis, 2003; Peck and Childers, 2003a). However, earlier contributions have devoted little attention to the differential influence of online sources of information on consumers' willingness to buy when a description of a product's tactile characteristics is provided (such as material properties and haptic sensations) and consumers do not have previous knowledge with the product or brand.

The research reported in this chapter aims to cover this gap by analyzing the effects of different online sources of tactile information on consumers' willingness to buy a product sold in the digital environment. In so doing, the authors distinguish between two kinds of digital sources (Bickart and Schindler, 2001): company websites, that offer visual and/or verbal descriptions of products, and third-party platforms hosting virtual communities (e.g., forums, blogs, social networks), where consumers share opinions and experiences about products. In fact, an important feature of online environments is the availability of both firm- and user-generated information in the form of descriptions provided by a company or reviews, opinions and comments given by users, respectively. As a consequence, consumers may acquire tactile information about products before purchasing by accessing directly the company

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