

Chapter 35

The Use of Written Descriptions and 2D Images as Cues for Tactile Information in Online Shopping

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ABSTRACT

Despite the steady growth in the use of online platforms for purchasing products in the past few years, e-commerce faces important challenges such as the inability of physically experiencing a product, specifically the inability to obtain tactile information. In this chapter, through a qualitative exploratory study approach, the author explores the possibility of conveying tactile characteristics of a product to consumers in an online shopping environment through product presentation formats such as written descriptions and 2D images. The author highlights the potential for sensory marketing through first reviewing literature on the subject with a special focus on touch and the inability to touch in online commercial channels. The methodology is presented along with the findings of the exploratory study. A concluding discussion of findings is presented and the potential for future research in the area of image processing to enhance 2D images ability to provide tactile information is discussed to conclude the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

According to a study of the Pew Research Center (2016) roughly 79% of Americans say they purchase online, in 2015 they were spending around 350 billion dollars annually online. In Mexico, although at a lower rate, the use of e-commerce is constantly growing. For instance, from 2013 to 2015 the estimated number of sales through e-commerce raised from 9.2 billions of dollars to 16.2 billion dollars, respectively (AMIPCI, 2016). The principal product categories purchased online are fashion products, such as clothing and accessories, sought primarily by females under 35 years old, (Treviño & Morton, 2016).

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Despite steady growth, e-commerce faces some challenges related to the forms available to consumers for evaluating products. For instance, marketing literature has found that touch is a direct form in examining products (Peck & Childers, 2003b). However, in today's online environment consumers are unable to physically experience the products and, for example, use their sense of touch for product evaluations and they must rely mainly on written descriptions and visual cues obtained through 2D images such as pictures and videos to obtain information of the products.

Despite the importance of the tactile information for consumers' evaluations and the effects of the information obtained through the haptic system on other consumer's variables such as perceptions and behaviors (Grohmann, Spangenberg, & Sprott, 2007; Guéguen & Jacob, 2006; Krishna & Morrin, 2008, Peck & Shu, 2009), almost no research on whether it is possible for consumers to obtain tactile information in an online shopping context through images, videos, or other types of stimuli has been conducted. Hence, the purpose of this work is to explore how consumers try to compensate for the missing sensory -specifically tactile- experience in an online shopping environment. That is, the characteristics of products can be discovered through the available sources of information that can provide effective somewhat equivalent information.

This book chapter contributes to the marketing literature which recognizes the importance of touch for consumers, but presents a research opportunity of exploring how to compensate touch in an online environment. Additionally, this chapter contributes to the image processing literature by exposing a relatively unexplored business application of the use of 2D images. Particularly, the chapter will explore the possibility of conveying tactile characteristics of a product to consumers in an online shopping environment through 2D images. Furthermore, practical implications of this research are also discussed.

This chapter is structured as follows: First, the chapter presents a literature review on sensory marketing with a special focus on touch and the inability to touch in online commercial channels. The research questions guiding the study are also presented. Second, the methodology of the exploratory study is described. Third, findings of the exploratory study are presented. Finally, conclusions and future research are discussed with a particular call for future research in the area of image processing and establishing the importance to develop techniques that enhance 2D images ability to provide tactile information.

BACKGROUND

Sensory Influences on Consumption

An increasing area of interest in the field of consumer behavior is the role that human senses play in the consumption context. Some of the research in this field of study has focused on the influences of vision on consumers' behavior and perceptions. For example, it has been found that the shape of the package or container can influence serving size and consumption (Wansink & Van Ittersum, 2003). Also, previous findings suggest that more attractive packages are perceived as larger in volume than less attractive packages with the same volume (Folkes & Matta, 2004). There is also evidence suggesting vision can bias product taste perceptions (Hoegg & Alba, 2007). Research focused on smell found this sense can influence information processing, store evaluations, memory of product information, consumption, and satisfaction. For example, researchers quantify that ambient scent influences consumer processing and decision making; specifically, consumers spend more time processing information and are more holistic in their processing (Mitchell, Kahn & Knasko, 1995). Likewise, other findings reveal evaluations of a store

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