

Will you buy if others touch it?
Evaluation of products touched by others during shopping

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Abstract

Research on multisensory nature of consumption has highlighted importance of smell, taste, and touch during product evaluation and subsequent purchase decisions. While sensory cues have a role to play in evaluation of products and services, their actual effects gets swayed by presence of other situational contexts which can substantially enhance the ability to explain and understand consumer-behavioural acts. One of the important situational context - social surroundings - has not been examined in detail for studies related to touch. Two previous studies have defined social surrounding in terms of presence/absence of unknown shopper. However, in many situations, the shopping activity is accompanied by family members or friends. Also, presence of salesperson acts as an important constituent of social surroundings. Any analysis of social surrounding is incomplete if it does not look into role of salespersons and known co-shoppers as part of social surroundings which influence shopping process. In this paper, it is proposed that social surrounding, as defined by presence of salespersons and known co-shoppers, has a role to play in haptic evaluation of products.

Key Words: haptic touch, social surroundings, co-shopper, salespersons

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Introduction

Human beings are generally credited with five senses i.e. vision, audition, smell, taste, and touch. Each of our sense organs is tuned to receive a particular range of stimuli that is relevant to our survival and we have been using knowledge acquired via them for dealing with our day-to-day work. The sensory evaluation process, as the evaluation process involving senses is called (Martinez, 2007), has also been utilized by human beings for evaluation and usage of products and services.

It has been suggested that in human beings, senses - other than vision and audition, lack the richness of patterning and organization (Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith, Bem, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1996). For the same, marketers have typically viewed consumers as verbal/visual information processors (Citrin, Stem, Spangenberg, & Clark, 2003) and thus utilized verbal and visual mean of communication to present information to the consumers. However, in everyday life, a number of senses are generally involved in any act. Lindstrom (2005) said that all five senses are important in any form of communication and life experiences.

Research on multisensory nature of consumption has also highlighted the non-verbal and non-visual aspects during product evaluation and subsequent purchase decisions (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Krishna, 2012; MacInnis & Price, 1987). Lately, a number of researchers (Schmitt, 1999; Underhill, 1999) have suggested that the opportunity to touch, try, taste, smell and explore the world of desirable objects can orient a person to make a purchase decision.

Research suggest that the opportunity to smell (Davies, Kooijman, & Ward, 2003; Mitchell, Kahn, & Knasko, 1995; Spangenberg, Crowley, & Henderson, 1996; Ward, Davies, & Kooijman, 2003), taste (Boutaud, 1999; Hoegg & Alba, 2007) and touch (Argo, Dahl, & Morales, 2006; 2008; Morales &

Fitzsimons, 2007; Müller, 2013; Peck & Childers, 2003a) can orient a person to make a purchase. Some recent studies (Förster, 2011; Hulten, 2012; Krishna, Elder, & Caldara, 2010; Spence & Gallace, 2011) have also examined the role of multiple sensory cues in influencing the consumers.

While sensory cues have a role to play in evaluation of products and services, their actual effects gets swayed by presence of other situational contexts. Past research has indicated that the purchase decision is influenced by the product, consumer, and situation characteristics which affect the relative weights of benefits (Day, Shocker, & Srivastava, 1979). Belk (1975) suggested that situation variables can substantially enhance the ability to explain and understand consumer-behavioural acts. One of the important situational context is social surroundings. However, inspite of its importance, social surrounding - as one of the situation characteristics – has not been examined in detail for studies related to touch. This study proposes examination of the role of touch in context of social surroundings involving others when consumers make purchase decisions.

Literature background

Stevens and Green (cf. Citrin et al., 2003) have defined touch as “sensation aroused through stimulation of receptors in the skin”. Although studies of touch involve different parts of the human body, primary interest is in studies using hands as principal source of input to touch. The term haptic is used to describe the information gained by an active movement of hand or arm (Gibson, 1962). The term was coined by Max Dessoir, who alluding to the term optic and acoustic, suggested that teaching of sense of touch involving tactile and muscular sensations, be called haptic (Jütte, 2009).

The haptic system is capable of encoding a number of object dimensions and properties: surface texture, internal substance, and thermal attributes, collectively called material attributes, as well as structural attributes of contour and size (Klatzky, Lederman, & Reed, 1987). Haptic touch has been found to be more important when encoding information about an object’s material (Klatzky, Lederman, & Matula, 1993). Studies in marketing have involved haptic touch as the stimulus.

Hornik (1992) pioneered the introduction of role of touch in marketing with a study that demonstrated the positive role of casual interpersonal touch on consumer behaviour. Since then the role of touch studies in marketing can be broadly categorized into two streams. (a) Studies examining consumer behaviour when a salesperson makes touch contact with consumer, and (b) Studies examining consumer behaviour when a consumer touches the product.

The first stream of research has examined the consumer behaviour related issues when a salesperson touches consumers. Studies (Guéguen & Jacob, 2006; Hornik, 1992; Smith, Gier, & Willis, 1982) conducted in this area have examined the role of salesperson's touch on shopping time, store evaluations, evaluation of salesperson during consumption activity, and compliance to marketing request. The findings indicate that in case of salesperson touching the consumers, it results into increased shopping time, higher evaluations of store and salesperson during consumption activity, and greater compliance to marketing request. In a related study, Martin (2012) showed that accidental interpersonal touch from a stranger on shopper produces a negative effect on consumer evaluations and shopping times. Some of these studies have employed experimental design methodology, while in one of the papers (Guéguen & Jacob, 2006) a field study was conducted in actual market settings.

The other and relatively more researched stream in the field of touch has examined consumer's touch of products where haptic touch was employed. Peck and Childers (2003a) proposed the haptic information framework which examined the product, individual and situational factors that affected use of touch information during product evaluation. In the product-related factors, it was pointed that texture, hardness, temperature, and weight information provided instrumental and autotelic material properties. These material properties were also used to differentiate products as high, moderate and low on haptic salience. While autotelic forms of information are related to the sensory experience and hedonic appreciation of the product,

instrumental properties are related to its structural properties and less to the sensory enjoyment of the product (Peck & Childers, 2003a).

While examining the consumer related factors, Peck and Childers (2003a) differentiated the customers based on their motivation for touch which was measured through “Need For Touch” (NFT) scale. A similar exercise was undertaken by Citrin et al. (2003) who developed a scale to measure need for tactile input (NTI) in product/brand evaluations. While NFT scale has two dimensions, autotelic and instrumental, containing 12 items (Peck & Childers, 2003b), NTI scale is a 6 item instrument with all items loading on single factor.

The third component of haptic information framework – situation factors, has been examined in case of touch and no-touch conditions by Peck and Childers (2003a). Citrin et al. (2003) examined the need for touch and its impact on the likelihood to purchase products over the internet. They suggested that the need for tactile input in making product choices will moderate the relationship between prior usage of the internet to gather shopping information and its use for product purchase. The results suggested that higher levels of the need for tactile input results in decreased levels of internet purchase of products requiring quality evaluation based on sensory cues other than sight/sound. Peck and Childers (2006) also examined the influence of touch on impulse-purchasing behaviour. Their research suggested that both individual and environment touch-related factors increase impulse purchasing.

There have been two more areas of research in understanding the role of consumer’s touch of products. One area of research examines positive and negative attributes associated with touch and the other examines the role of interaction of two different senses on consumer judgment. The negative attributes of touch was highlighted by Argo et al. (2006) who proposed a theory of customer contamination which posited that consumers evaluated less favourably the products which were touched by other shoppers. They examined the effect of three contamination cues – proximity contact, time elapsed since contact, and the number of contact sources - on consumers’

product evaluations and purchase intentions. The study found that the increased salience of contact through a variety of contamination cues negatively affects consumer evaluation of touched products. In a study regarding positive contagion effect of touch, Argo et al. (2008) found that product evaluations are higher when consumers perceive a product as having been physically touched by attractive people. Similarly, Morales and Fitzsimons (2007) proposed that disgusting products are believed to transfer offensive properties through physical contact to other products they touch, thus influencing evaluation decisions.

In the second area of research, few studies examine the role of interacting senses on consumer judgment. Krishna (2006) has focused on the role of visual and haptic senses on the elongation bias – the judgment bias in which taller container appear to be more voluminous than shorter ones of equal volume. It was found that with visual cues alone (seeing the object with handling) and with bimodal “vision and haptic cues” (seeing and handling the objects), elongation bias was observed. However, with the haptic cues alone (handling the objects blindfolded), a reversal of elongation bias was obtained. Krishna and Morrin (2008) have developed a conceptual framework regarding the perceptual transfer of haptic or touch-related characteristics from product containers to judgments of the products themselves. Thus, evaluation of a product consumed by consumer gets affected by the package/container in which it is presented. The framework, however, also suggests that consumers high in autotelic NFT are less affected by such cues compared to consumers low in autotelic NFT.

Rational for study

The haptic information framework, given by Peck and Childers (2003a) has been one of the pioneer studies in the role of touch in consumer behaviour. While the framework addresses the consumer and product related characteristics, it does not go beyond touch and no-touch situations in consumer shopping situations. Peck and Childers (2006) followed it up later by examining the influence of touch on impulse-purchasing behaviour. Some other researchers have also examined

role of touch in other situations like internet shopping (Citrin et al., 2003) and presence of other shoppers (Argo et al., 2006). However, there are still a number of shopping situations where role of touch needs to be examined but has not yet been covered.

Kotler (1974) proposed that situational factors help to convert behavioural intentions into buying behaviour. This led to a number of researchers examining the effect of situational factors on consumer behaviour (Belk, 1974; Belk, 1975; Miller & Ginter, 1979). According to Belk (1974), any investigation of buyer behaviour that ignores situational effects is likely to provide unreliable results unless the characteristics of buyers or choice alternatives are so intense as to be influential across all relevant situations. He suggested that situation variables can substantially enhance the ability to explain and understand consumer behavioural acts (Belk, 1975). Moreover, situational variables may be influenced by marketers in contrast to consumer characteristics which already exist and are not amenable to marketer's influence (Nicholls & Roslow, 1996).

The research stream examining the consumer behaviour related issues concerned with effect of sales person's touch on consumers had repeatedly called for situation as an important variable. Steir and Hall (1984) had called for establishing the context in order to understand the qualitative differences in touch. Hornik (1992) pointed out that the behavioural response to touch will depend on touching situation or context and context may be an important determinant of consumer's reactions. Guéguen and Jacob (2006) also called for research on situations that are encountered frequently in consumer behaviour like physical and social surroundings and pointed out the need to test different situations. Similarly, an understanding about the role of situation in studies involving consumer's touch of products where haptic touch was employed, becomes important. This study lists these shopping situations and examines the role of haptic touch on product evaluation when consumers face these shopping situations.

Marketers have recognized the potential influence of situations in consumer behaviour and have made efforts to understand the role of situations in purchase situations. Belk (1974) defined

situation as all these factors particular to a time and place of observation which do not follow from knowledge of personal (intra-individual) and stimulus (choice alternatives) attributes and have a demonstrable and systematic effect on current behaviour. He pointed out that the definition describes situation in terms of observable aggregate effects rather than in terms of similarities in individual perceptions of situations. He also noted that this definition did not include a host of broad environmental factors which were not specific to a time or place of observation. In order to operationalize the definition, he proposed five groups of situational characteristics (Belk, 1975), namely:

(1) Physical Surroundings

(2) Social Surroundings

(3) Temporal Perspective

(4) Task Definition

(5) Antecedent Stages

Belk's taxonomic structure seems to accommodate the vast majority of situational variables typically explored within a consumer research context (Nicholson, Clarke, & Blakemore, 2002). Moreover, the five dimensions hypothesized by Belk are not only applicable to the in-store shopping situations but can also be equally applicable in remote shopping situations like catalogue and electronic shopping (Nicholson et al., 2002). However, the role of social surroundings becomes more important in case of brick and mortar shopping in comparison to other types of shopping like online shopping.

Role of social surroundings on shopping

Belk (1975) has suggested that social surroundings include other persons present, their characteristics, their apparent roles, and interpersonal interactions. This will focus on the presence

or absence of other persons, together with their social roles, and opportunities for interaction (Nicholson et al, 2002). In retail environment, it will involve the presence of known as well as unknown people during purchasing process and customer's interaction with them. On one side this dimension will involve customer's awareness about presence of sales staff along with opportunities of interaction with them. On the other hand, it will involve proximity to total strangers and presence of those accompanying the customer on the shopping trip along with their influence on purchase decisions.

When we talk about role of haptic touch for product evaluation in social surroundings, it involves how the social surrounding will influence the product evaluation when the evaluation is done by haptic touch. At the first level, it will involve the way people perceive an object when it has been touched by other people. At the same time, it will also include whether presence or absence of other people influence the product evaluation when haptic touch is involved

Argo et al (2006) proposed that when consumers become cognizant that another customer has previously touched a product, their evaluations of and purchase intentions for the product decrease. They tested the proposition by manipulating factors that increased the salience that some other consumer's contact has occurred with the product. However, in this experiment, the signals, which were called contamination cues, were supposed to provide negative contamination effects. This was based on the premise that negative contamination effects happen because the contact was between some unknown customer and product. In another study, Argo et al. (2008) showed that if the unknown customer is attractive then the product touched by attractive other can result into positive product evaluation.

In both of above-mentioned studies, the social surrounding was defined in terms of presence/absence of unknown shopper. However, in many situations, the shopping activity is accompanied by family members or friends. Also, presence of salesperson acts as an important constituent of social surroundings. Any analysis of social surrounding is incomplete if it does not look

into role of salespersons and known co-shoppers as part of social surroundings which influence shopping process. In this paper, it is proposed that social surrounding, as defined by presence of salespersons and known co-shoppers, has a role to play in haptic evaluation of products.

In order to explain the role of salespersons and known co-shoppers, we build upon Rozin, Millman and Nemeroff (1986) work who stated that people can have both positive and negative responses to objects that have been touched by others. Rozin et al. (1986) cited the laws of sympathetic magic, developed by James Frazer and Marcel Mauss, which summarized a pattern of beliefs and practices that exist over several traditional cultures to describe how the world works. One of the laws of sympathetic magic namely *law of contagion* propounds that things that once have been in contact with each other may influence each other through transfer of some of their properties via an "essence." This influence remains after the physical contact has ceased, and may be permanent (Rozin et al, 1986). The "contact" may be directly between an offensive or revered person, and a neutral object. Thus, when a source (person/object) and a recipient (another person/object) come into direct or indirect contact, the source influences the recipient (Rozin et al., 1990).

Rozin et al. (1986) proposed that in the laws of sympathetic magic, the "magic" can be positive or negative. Therefore in contagion, contact of an object with a loved or respected person can enhance the value of the object (positive contagion), whereas contact with a disliked or despised person can devalue the object (negative contagion). Nemeroff and Rozin (1994) stated that positive contagion is result of a symbolic interaction model that is based on interpersonal/moral factors. In this, the positive contamination effects arise primarily because people want to be associated with an item that belongs to someone about whom they have strong, positive feelings.

In retail context, many of the purchasing decisions are made by family or in groups rather than by individuals. The fact that consumers obtain information about products and services from other people, particularly family members, friends and neighbours is well documented in the

marketing literature. Family members including spouses and children have long been acknowledged as playing an important role within family purchasing decisions, with their ability to directly and indirectly influence family purchasing. Studies have examined role of spouses (Kirchler, 1993; Spiro, 1983), children (Pettersson, Olsson, & Fjellström, 2004; Shoham & Dalakas, 2005; Wilson and Wood, 2004), and adolescent offsprings (Bristol, 2001; Wayland & Coe, 1993) on the family purchase decision making. Tinson and Nancarrow (2005) and Tinson et al. (2008) pointed out that in spite of changing social trends which include changing composition of family and changes in gender role orientation, different family members including children will continue to influence the family purchasing decisions.

Similarly, a number of studies have examined the influence exerted by friends in purchase decision making of consumers. Luo (2005) suggested that presence of peers increases the urge to purchase. This phenomenon is especially prominent in case of teenagers. Gilkison (1973) identified that parents have declined in importance as a source of influence on teenagers' buying decisions and friends of the teenagers have increased in influence. In recent years, Mangleburg, Doney, and Bristol (2004), while examining the phenomenon of teenager's shopping with friends, found that teenagers are susceptible to informational influence from friends. This susceptibility to peer influence is then related to various aspects of teen shopping, such as frequency and enjoyment of shopping with pals, which, in turn, are related to sentiment toward retailing and spending tendencies.

Having examined the possibility of positive contagion effect and role of family and peer as positive influencers in purchase decisions, we expect that presence of family members and friends will have a positive influence on product evaluation when haptic touch is involved. On the basis of above discussion, we make the following two propositions:

P1: Consumer product evaluations and purchase intentions will be higher if the product has been touched by known co-shopper.

P2: Consumer product evaluations and purchase intentions will be higher if the consumer touches the product in presence of known co-shopper.

While we propose that co-shopper will have influence on consumer's product evaluation, consumers also regularly interact with retail salespeople in order to make purchases across a wide range of products and services. Retail salespeople often serve as a critical link between retailers and their consumers. Firstly, these salespeople provide information and service that assist consumers during the purchase process. Moreover, selling being a social situation in which two people come together for a specific purpose (Fine & Schumann, 1992), salespeople influence the consumers and their purchase decision making. This influence often stems from salesperson's credibility (Jones Moore, Stanaland, & Wyatt, 1998; Sharma, 1990) which has different effect on consumer's attitude and intention depending on whether consumers have experiences of the product (Wu and Shaffer, 1987). Sharma (1990) explained that the source credibility is different for no prior product experience and with product experience because when the buyers have no prior opinions of a product, there are no product-oriented thoughts and the subjects are concerned only with the credibility of the source and message. However, in other cases when subjects have prior opinions on a product, then these product-oriented thoughts interact with the salesperson's credibility and message.

Sharma (1990) examined the salesperson's credibility for products where buyer had no prior experience with the product and found the "high credibility salesperson" condition produced higher purchase intention. Similarly, Jones et al. (1998) examined the salesperson's credibility on four dimensions namely perceived expertise, likeability, attractiveness, and trustworthiness individually. This study, like the study of Sharma (1990), was conducted for product where buyer did not have a prior product experience and results suggested that three dimensions of salesperson credibility i.e. perceived expertise, likeability and attractiveness predicted purchase intention. This implied that, in an initial impression context, consumers had high perceptions of salesperson's credibility.

With consumers having a high perceptions of salesperson's credibility, presence of salesperson during shopping process is likely to have a positive influence on the purchase intentions and product evaluation, especially when the customer has no prior experience of product. Thus, we expect that presence of salespersons will have a positive influence on product evaluation when haptic touch is involved to examine the product and make the following two propositions:

P3: Consumer product evaluations and purchase intentions for a product with no prior experience will be higher if the product has been touched by salesperson.

P4: Consumer product evaluations and purchase intentions for a product with no prior experience will be higher if the consumer touches the product in presence of salesperson.

The way forward

Marketers have recognized the potential influence of situations in consumer behaviour and made efforts to understand the role of situations during shopping process. In this paper, a propositions are offered which explains the role of haptic touch on product attitude and purchase intentions in context of social surroundings for consumers undertaking shopping. The propositions explained in earlier section need to be empirically verified before they can be generalized. It is proposed that these propositions can be tested using experiment set-up. Experimental method in laboratory setting can be used for simulating situations pertaining to the research objectives of the study. It is expected that experiment in laboratory setting will help to standardize the treatments, making them comparable across respondents. Other benefit of using experiments is that it will provide a better control over extraneous variables and thereby reducing confounding impact. Moreover, most of the previous studies in field of haptic touch (Argo et al., 2006; Krishna, 2006; Krishna & Morrin, 2008; Morales & Fitzsimons, 2007; Peck & Childers, 2003a; Peck & Wiggins, 2006) has used experimental method to test the hypotheses.

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