



# The effects of online product presentation on consumer responses: A mental imagery perspective



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of online product presentation on consumer responses from a mental imagery perspective and the moderating effect of style of processing (SOP). College women ( $N = 550$ ) participated in an online experiment using a 2 (picture: concrete consumption background vs. solid background)  $\times$  2 (text: concrete descriptions vs. no descriptions) between-subjects factorial design. The findings suggest that product presentation with a relevant consumption background is more effective in evoking mental imagery than one with a solid white background. Mental imagery increases consumers' behavioral intentions by eliciting a positive emotional response to product presentations. The findings further show that descriptions of background in text interact with a picture of consumption background to stimulate mental imagery, depending on SOP (visualize vs. verbalizer). The results have practical implications for effective product presentations in online retailing.

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## 1. Introduction

The manner in which a product is presented impacts the consumer shopping experience both online and offline. Empirical research findings support the idea that well-presented products create a positive mood that further leads to positive shopping outcomes in offline retailing (Turley & Milliman, 2000). In online retailing, effective product presentation not only attracts consumers to a website, but also facilitates consumer purchase decision making in the absence of direct product experiences. In an online environment where consumers are unable to physically examine a product prior to purchase, product presentation plays a critical role in eliciting affective and cognitive responses, subsequently impacting shopping experiences and outcomes. The role online product presentation plays becomes even more vital for products such as apparel that involve sensory experience as part of the consumer decision making process (Kim & Lennon, 2008; Yoo & Kim, 2012).

Unlike other non-store retail formats such as catalogs, an online retail format provides an interactive environment in which various technology tools can facilitate shopping. Taking advantage of recent advances in technology, an increasing number of online apparel retailers have begun to adopt innovative visualization tools (e.g., zoom, 3D views, and video) to satisfy consumers' need for sensory product experience

(Adobe Scene 7, 2010). Concurrently, a growing number of researchers have examined the effectiveness of online visual product presentation with a strong focus on experiential (hedonic) values facilitated by those visualization tools. According to Jeong, Fiore, Niehm, and Lorenz (2009), consumers' experiential values refer to "sensory, emotional, and cognitive stimulation, satisfying curiosity" (p. 106). Jeong et al. find that rich and more complex images (e.g., a model situated in an elaborate setting depicting a relevant lifestyle) lead to greater experiential values than basic images (e.g., front views on a plain backdrop) because complex images are more effective in stimulating various emotional and cognitive experiences, resulting in more engaging shopping experiences. Jiang and Benbasat (2007) find that online presentation strategies such as video-without-narration and virtual product experiences are more effective than static pictures and video-with-narration in influencing consumer experiences in terms of interactivity and vividness.

Despite the increasing attention being devoted to online product presentation by both practitioners and scholars, evidence suggests that the lack of sensory product experience continues to be a major deterrent to online purchasing (Internet Retailer, 2005). Over two-thirds of online shoppers prefer offline stores to online stores for apparel purchases, whereas less than one-third of shoppers prefer offline stores for other consumer products (PwC, 2011). This suggests that current online product presentations, even those that utilize a variety of visualization technologies, may not be effective in facilitating virtual product experience. In fact, the effectiveness of current visualization tools is largely anecdotal, and there is much to learn about what makes an online product presentation effective in facilitating a virtual product experience.

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Research findings in the area of online product presentation are somewhat inconsistent. For example, despite strong support from advertising and psychology research regarding picture superiority, Kim and Lennon (2008) find that the amount of product information provided in text has a stronger impact than picture size on consumer attitudes and purchase intent. Additionally, in conflict with the general notion that “more is better,” Song and Kim (2012) show that consumers perceive more product information from one large product photo than from four large product photos, possibly due to the lack of visual fluency of multiple photos. Therefore, there is a compelling need for further research on online product presentation.

Addressing this gap in the literature, this study aims to determine which factors make online product presentations effective in facilitating virtual product experience without direct interactions with a product. Drawing on advertising, psychology, and tourism research, this study postulates that mental imagery may be a key construct that facilitates sensory product experience. Mental imagery refers to “a mental event involving visualization of a concept or relationship” (Lutz & Lutz, 1978, p. 611) and involves perceptual information processing, in which information is represented in an individual's working memory using imagination. Mental imagery of how a garment is represented in consumers' minds may become a major source of information as they make judgments (Schwarz, 1986). When consumers experience a high level of mental imagery, they may be able to acquire enough information to make a purchase decision without direct product experience. Prior research provides ample empirical support for the positive effects of mental imagery on consumer behaviors (Babin & Burns, 1997; Miller & Stoica, 2003).

Using the mental imagery perspective, this study seeks to identify ways to enhance mental imagery through online product presentations and to examine the process by which the mental imagery elicited by online product presentation influences consumer decision making. This study further examines how an individual characteristic (i.e., style of processing: visualizer vs. verbalizer) influences how a consumer responds to different online product presentations. This study's findings are expected to shed new light on extant online retailing literature with the mental imagery perspective and to provide practical information for online retailers.

## 2. Conceptual development

Drawing on dual coding theory from cognitive psychology (Paivio, 2007) and the emotion literature, this study proposes that online product presentation, in terms of how pictures and text are used, evokes different levels of mental imagery, which impacts behavioral intentions through the emotions invoked. Specifically, this study examines how the concreteness of presentation impacts mental imagery and how individual characteristics moderate the relationship between the concreteness of presentation and mental imagery elicited.

### 2.1. Concreteness

In psycholinguistic studies, concreteness refers to the degree of ease or difficulty involved in eliciting a mental image (Paivio, Yulille, & Madigan, 1968). Concrete words such as *apple* have tangible referents that readily evoke a mental image, while abstract words such as *religion* lack tangible referents, making it more difficult to evoke a mental image. For some abstract words, related concrete words with tangible referents, such as *church*, help to evoke a mental image of *religion* indirectly. This explains why people process concrete words more quickly and accurately than abstract words (Connell & Lynott, 2012).

Concreteness also evokes a level of sensory experience (Paivio et al., 1968; Schwanenflugel, Harnishfeger, & Stowe, 1988). Words that refer to objects or materials are more concrete because they readily evoke visual or other sensory experiences. For example, *apple* is a highly

concrete word because *apple* evokes multiple sensory experiences related to sight, smell, and taste.

In this study, we conceptualize the concreteness of online product presentation in two dimensions: picture and text. We operationalize the concrete picture as having a relevant consumption background that evokes visual and/or other sensory experiences of wearing an item. We further operationalize the concrete text as a written description of a relevant consumption background using concrete words (e.g., a palm fringed beach).

### 2.2. Mental imagery

As a mental activity that visualizes a concept or relationship (Lutz & Lutz, 1978), mental imagery reflects the process by which sensory or perceptual experience is represented in an individual's working memory in terms of ideas, feelings, and memories (MacInnis & Price, 1987). Imagery may be multi-sensory in that people can incorporate mental imagery when exposed to auditory, visual, haptic, and/or gustatory stimuli, but mental imagery can also involve a single sensory dimension such as visual (MacInnis & Price, 1987). Visual imagery is the most dominant, followed by auditory imagery (White, Sheehan, & Ashton, 1977).

Focusing on the mental representations of consumption behaviors, consumption vision is a form of mental imagery (Philips, Olson, & Baumgartner, 1995). Walters, Sparks, and Herington (2007) suggest that imagery has two dimensions: elaboration and quality. Elaboration refers to the number of images evoked in one's mind, and quality refers to their vividness, clarity, intensity, sharpness, and appeal. Walters et al. show that both concrete pictures and textual descriptions of travel destinations help improve the elaboration and the quality of mental imagery.

Advertising research confirms that visual and verbal advertising messages evoke mental imagery, which further influences cognitive, affective, and conative responses (Babin & Burns, 1997; Bone & Allen, 1992; Fennis, Das, & Franssen, 2012). Tourism research shows that consumers can conjure up a vacation experience by combining various pictures of vacation destinations with their prior experiences (Olson, McAlexander, & Rovers, 1986). The mental imagery evoked by concrete pictures in a travel advertisement enhances behavioral intentions (Miller & Stoica, 2003).

Prior research also supports that concrete text influences mental imagery. In advertising, Burns, Biswas, and Babin (1993) find positive relationships between the concreteness of the advertising copy, the vividness of imagery, and behavioral intentions. Rossiter (1982) suggests that advertising requires concrete text in order to evoke mental imagery. Lien and Chen (2013) also find that concrete text in a narrative advertisement enhances readers' imagery processing through representing the images in their minds. Similarly, in tourism research, concrete text such as “a palm fringed beach” increases both the elaboration and quality of the mental imagery (Walters et al., 2007) (see Table 1).

Both websites and print advertising use pictures and text as basic forms of communication (Singh & Dalal, 1999). Thus, it is plausible to postulate that concrete pictures and text on a retail website also evoke mental imagery, as in print advertising. If online retailers present an apparel item with a concrete consumption background, consumers may more readily engage in consumption imagery, compared to the item presented with a solid background. Similarly, an apparel item presented with concrete text of consumption background may be more effective in generating mental imagery than the item presented without such text.

In retailing, Hirschman (1984) notes that mental imagery impacts consumers' ability to imagine (visualize images in the mind), recall prior experiences in images, and change their cognitive states. When the product is absent in the physical environment, people evaluate a product using their mental imagination of consumption experience (Horowitz, 1972). Thus, in online retailing, product images (e.g., swimsuits) on a relevant consumption background (e.g., beach) and/or

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