



The fluent online shopping experience

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ABSTRACT

Consumers increasingly use various Internet-enabled devices for online shopping; thus, a critical topic for both research and practice is the visual characteristics of the information presented in this medium. This study builds on fluency theory within an environmental psychology framework. Specifically, this research examines how consumers' perceived fluency of the verbal online information affects their perceived cognitive effort and positive affect within a choice context. The experimental results show that (1) perceptual fluency affects both cognitive effort and positive affect experienced during online shopping and (2) cognitive effort and positive affect influence judgments about the perceived decision quality of the choice made. This research is notable in its simultaneous (as opposed to consecutive) examination of the relationship among the three dimensions of processing fluency (perceptual fluency, positive affect, and cognitive effort) and their impact on consumers' choice satisfaction with an online shopping task.

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1. Introduction

Forrester Research estimates that U.S. online retail will reach \$262 billion and \$370 billion by 2013 and 2017, respectively, representing a compound annual growth rate of 10% (Mulpuru, 2013). One of the primary reasons consumers go online is to search for information (Horrigan, 2008). Given consumers rapid adoption of various Internet-accessible devices (e.g., tablets, smartphones), understanding how they perceive online information relevant to their shopping needs is crucial. The nature of online information and its impact on shopping behaviors in particular are attracting increasing research attention. Recent research shows that verbal (vs. visual) product information, under high assortment conditions, results in lower probability of choice deferral (Townsend & Kahn, 2014). The present study focuses specifically on the verbal format of online product information and examines its impact on selected aspects of the online shopping experiences. The central premise is that consumers' perceptual fluency of the verbal information presented online is a key factor that shapes their perceived cognitive effort, positive affect, and, ultimately, their choice outcome judgments in the virtual shopping context.

Central to this study is the perceptual fluency construct, which refers to the perceived ease with which one attends to the information presented based on the aesthetic properties of the stimulus (Reber, Schwarz, & Winkielman, 2004). A large body of literature in offline contexts shows that processing fluency (both perceptual and conceptual processes combined) affects judgments, ranging from brand image formation (Labroo & Lee, 2006) to truth (Reber & Schwarz, 1999). The main premise of this research is that perceptual fluency is a critical factor in the online commercial context with important implications for consumer shopping outcomes. Previous research shows the importance of perceptual processes on consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions while shopping online (Jarvenpaa & Todd, 1996; Szymanski & Hise, 2000), as well as the increasing managerial focus on optimizing product presentations on web pages (Burke, 2002). Despite these efforts, however, research pays relatively little attention to how informational properties affect consumers' perceptual processes online. Notable exceptions include work on perceived website complexity (Nadkarni & Gupta, 2007), website diagnosticity (Jiang & Benbasat, 2007), online display factors (Jiang & Punj, 2010), and visual information quality (Im, Lennon, & Stoel, 2010). One uniform conclusion from all these studies is that additional research is necessary on the antecedents and consequences of consumers' online information perceptions.

From a managerial perspective, four trends warrant attention on this topic: (1) the proliferation of online commercial information (Lurie & Mason, 2007), (2) the increasing variety in informational environments via Internet-accessible devices (Rainie, 2010), (3) consumers' growing use of online information to inform buying decisions (Mulpuru, 2013), and (4) the evidence that online informational environments are

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more cognitively demanding than offline environments (Chiang, 2003). Online, the dynamics of information on the web differ from the physical store environment, as exemplified by consumers' differing needs between virtual and real shopping contexts (Burke, 2002). Buyers and sellers need to better understand the notion of perceived visual fluency online given the increasing use of information in this medium. In summary, this topic is timely and significant because shoppers' perceptions of the information may influence not only how they process it but also the shopping outcomes that ultimately result from this processing (Im et al., 2010; Jiang & Punj, 2010; Townsend & Kahn, 2014).

In light of this discussion, this study focuses on a critical perceptual construct—perceptual fluency—and demonstrates its impact on online shoppers' cognitive and affective evaluations of their shopping outcomes. Many firms treat the two constructs in this study, namely, customer satisfaction and positive affect, as key performance metrics (Daly, 2011), with satisfaction indirectly influencing firm value (Luo, Homburg, & Wieske, 2010).

2. Overview of the proposed model

The proposed online choice model is rooted in the stimulus–organism–response (SOR) framework, which posits that how information (the stimulus) is presented influences its perception and processing by the organism, ultimately affecting behavioral and attitudinal responses (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In this study, online atmospherics serve as the informational stimuli presented to shoppers. Research on shopping contexts using the SOR framework shows that how consumers process the environmental stimuli affects their behavioral intent (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2003) and responses, such as spending (Chebat & Michon, 2003).

Within this framework, this study aims to extend the interactionist perspective (Reber et al., 2004) in an online environment, which simultaneously examines the relationships between the properties of online product information and the perceptual constructs. The model (Fig. 1) underscores perceptual fluency as a key factor within the “organism” (consumer), which is shaped by consumer perceptions of the presented information (“stimulus”) and which ultimately influences perceived shopping outcomes (“response”). The “stimulus” represents three objectively manipulated forms of product information properties (text clarity, text and background contrast, and product information intensity), and the “response” refers to consumers' perceived quality of and satisfaction with their product choice decision.

2.1. Stimuli: aesthetic aspects of the product information

Perceptual fluency is a low-level process pertaining to the ease of identifying the physical aspects of a stimulus (Jacoby, Kelley, & Dywan, 1989). Core features of an aesthetic experience generally include goodness of form, symmetry, and figure–ground contrast (Reber

et al., 2004). *Goodness of form* in an informational format refers to text readability, with readers being able to process one font type more easily than another (Song & Schwarz, 2008). *Symmetry*, or the amount of information extracted from a stimulus (less being more pleasant) along with contrast and clarity of the stimulus (i.e., how easily the focal stimulus is viewed in its context), facilitates fluent processing (Reber et al., 2004). Research in environmental psychology operationalizes information intensity as the amount of information presented (Menon & Kahn, 2002). Symmetry and information intensity affect fluency similarly, in that lower amounts of information may reduce the attentional effort required. Finally, the *figure–ground contrast*, or the ease with which the focal object is discerned from its embedded context, has a direct correlation with the speed of stimulus recognition, with the latter being used as a standard measure of fluency (e.g., Checkosky & Whitlock, 1973).

In an online context, high task-relevant stimuli comprise “all the site descriptors (both verbal and pictorial) that appear on the screen facilitating the consumer's shopping goal attainment” (Eroglu et al., 2003, p. 142). Product information relevant to a product selection task exemplifies high-task relevant stimuli. Offline, high-density retail environments (i.e., high number of objects within a given space) accentuate perceptions of retail crowding and result in negative emotions for task-oriented shoppers (Eroglu & Machleit, 1990). These findings suggest that the intensity of information presented within a pre-defined space influences a person's cognitions and affect, particularly in a task-oriented choice situation. Saegert's (1978) work in offline contexts suggests that high-density environments increase demands on attention capacity and create unfavorable attitudes. This finding implies that online shopping contexts with high amounts of information may increase visual attention effort, decrease perceived fluency, and thus increase the perceived cognitive effort associated with information processing therein. Given that less fluent processing can result in less positive evaluations of the focal object (Reber et al., 2004), a consumer's attitude toward the shopping experience should be less favorable than in informational environments that afford higher perceptual fluency.

To conclude, information intensity should be negatively related to its perceived fluency because more visual attentive effort (a precursor to comprehension) is required. Conversely, text clarity and the background contrast with the surrounding environment should enhance consumers' ability to perceive the stimuli more efficiently, thus enhancing the perceptions of processing ease (Song & Schwarz, 2008; Winkielman, Schwarz, Reber, & Fazendeiro, 2003). In light of this discussion, this study extends previous research and proposes that consumers' perceptual fluency of online information is influenced by three objective (form-based) qualities, which in turn affect the cognitive and affective evaluations of the information processed.

2.2. Organism: perceptual fluency, cognitive effort, and positive affect

This study proposes that perceptual fluency is a key antecedent within the “organism” of the SOR framework. Prior research identifies two types of processing fluency: perceptual and conceptual. The ease of processing the physical features of a stimulus indicates perceptual fluency, whereas the ease with which its meaning is constructed in the mind represents conceptual fluency (Reber et al., 2004). Processing fluency refers to all the subjective feelings of ease or difficulty that people experience when sorting out information about an object (Novemsky, Dhar, Schwarz, & Simonson, 2007). Research shows that processing fluency is a central construct that influences various domains of human judgments and subsequent behaviors (for extensive reviews, see Jacoby et al., 1989). If consumers read the product information fluently, the assessed ease of processing information might result in a positive affective response to the product being described in the text (Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001; see also Winkielman et al., 2003). More significantly, these resulting feelings (positive or negative) might have little to do with the attributes of the product (for a review, see Schwarz, 2004). For example, shoppers might access attribute

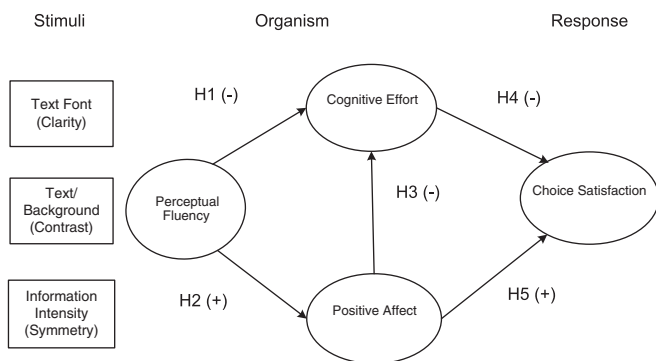


Fig. 1. Fluent online experience model.

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