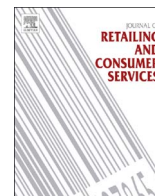




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I virtually try it ... I want it ! Virtual Fitting Room: A tool to increase on-line and off-line exploratory behavior, patronage and purchase intentions

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ABSTRACT

E-commerce has important advantages compared to traditional shopping (e.g. time, choice, price) but offers only a partial view of the shopping environment. For example, the lack of physical apprehension is a major disadvantage of online purchasing. To create a shopping environment close to reality, some companies now propose Virtual Fitting Rooms (VFR¹) on their websites. This research aims to highlight the effects of an online VFR on consumer's exploratory behavior and intention to purchase, both online and offline contexts. Results of two experiments showed that the presence of such a tool significantly increases specific curiosity about the product, intention to patronize (online and offline) and intention to purchase (online and offline). The latter effect is mediated through firstly perceptual specific curiosity about the product and then the intention to patronize.

1. Introduction

In July 2013, retailing today.com published a study which announced that 81% of consumers seek out online before making a purchase. But the information they can find online is often limited. For example, they cannot interact with a salesperson or enjoy the atmosphere of a store or smell, touch or try on the product... In line with this statement, engineers try to minimize the gap between the real store and the website by developing new sales aids based on new technologies such as virtual center, virtual agent, virtual fitting room and so on. In an editorial special issue focused on the impact of these new technologies on retailing, Pantano (2010) insists on the relevance to understand their effects on consumer behavior. Moreover, Pantano and Naccarato (2010) proposed five research priorities to understand the effects of these technologies on behavior including need recognition, search of information, pre-purchase evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. In an other way, Ostorm et al. (2010) proposed similar research priorities for the science of service in particular related the stimulation of service innovation. Thus, a lot of research has been developed. The aim of this paper is to highlight and to understand the effect of such new technologies on exploratory consumer behavior and more precisely on specific curiosity.

Existing literature on these tools can be presented in two parts. A major part concerns the research on social new sales aids – such as

virtual agents or avatars – and their effects on pre-purchase, pre-purchase and post-purchase/consumption variables. In general, most research has shown that consumers increase their exploratory behavior (Swaminathan, 2003), trust (Lemoine and Notebaert, 2011), immersion (Wang et al., 2007), positive emotions (Murray and Häubl, 2008), purchase intention (Senecal and Nantel, 2004), and satisfaction with the website (Viot and Bressolles, 2012) in the presence of a social new sales aid (vs. not). The second part of the research is less developed and is devoted to the direct effects of environmental new sales aids which could be assimilated to the design and ambient factors of the atmosphere (Baker, 1986). Such tools as virtual fitting rooms or virtual centers have significant and positive effects on consumers' intention to try on and visualize products (Ganapathy et al., 2004), power of retention of the website (Murray and Häubl, 2008; Häubl and Figueroa, 2002), flow (Hoffman and Novak, 2009), trust on the product (Trifts and Häubl, 2003), purchase intention (Li, Daugherty and Biocca, 2002) and satisfaction (Murray and Häubl, 2008). While the effect of social new sales aids on exploratory behavior has been examined (Swaminathan, 2003), the effect of environmental aids on this dimension of behavior has been largely unexplored. To fill this theoretical gap, the current research further examines the direct effects of a Virtual Fitting Room (VFR) on online consumers' exploratory behavior and the underlying mechanism (Experiment 1).

Moreover, today, 88% of consumers look for information online

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¹ VFR: Virtual Fitting Room. PSC: Perceptual Specific Curiosity.

before making their purchase offline² (Digitas Sutdy, Vivaki advance, 2013). Accordingly, we also test the effect of VFR on offline behavior (Experiment 2).

First, we develop the theoretical background and hypotheses. Then, the research method and major results are presented, followed by the general discussion and conclusion.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

In the theoretical framework presented above, exploratory behavior is measured through the time spent on a product page (Murray and Häubl, 2008) or the amount of search (Swaminathan, 2003). Theories on consumer motivation are not addressed yet even if they are essential to understand the exploratory behavior (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Work on motivation distinguishes the intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is defined as “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn” (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Extrinsic motivation is “a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some outcomes” (Deci and Ryan, 2000). If engineers develop technical tools, supports for extrinsic motivation, marketing researchers have to understand the intrinsic motivations of the consumer. To meet this objective, the variable “curiosity” is mobilized in this work. Based on the nature and function of environmental new sales aids, we assume a direct link between these media and the specific curiosity of the consumer. This idea is developed in the next paragraph. A link with the intent to patronize and purchase is proposed thereafter.

2.1. Consumers’ curiosity as a motivational variable and its link with virtual fitting rooms

In marketing research, curiosity is defined as a part of the shopping experience as an affective reaction (e.g., Anderson et al., 2014), a part of epistemic value (e.g., Davis and Hodges, 2012) or a part of the flow concept. For example, Huang (2003) considers flow as a multidimensional construct including control, attention, interest and curiosity. Moreover, Pace (2004) and Agarwal and Karahanna (2000) defined curiosity as an antecedent of the flow which contributes to decrease the cognitive charge of an immersive experience.

However, according to psychologists, curiosity is an intrinsic motivation for consumer (Berlyne, 1954) and seems to be the most relevant variable to explain the exploratory behavior of consumers (Berlyne, 1950). Consistent with past research we here distinguished the specific curiosity from the diversive curiosity or trait curiosity (Ho and Dempsey, 2010). While the diversive curiosity is an individual trait, the specific curiosity is a contextual variable defined as “an intrinsic desire or motivation for new information to stimulate interest and/or remove uncertainty” (Berlyne, 1954). In an other way, Koo and Ju (2010) discerned four types of curiosity: interpersonal, epistemic, sensory and perceptual curiosity. The last one is defined as “the desire that motivates individuals to having interest in and giving attention to novel perceptual stimulation” (Collins, Litman and Spielberg, 2004, p. 1130). Based on these definitions, we expect a link between VFR, as a novel perceptual stimulation, and the concept of perceptual specific curiosity.

Past research on curiosity identified four so-called collative variables of curiosity (Berlyne, 1954). More a stimulus is perceived as novel and complex and more it increases uncertainty and generates conflict with prior information, more consumers develop an exploratory behavior. There are two ways in which connection can be made between VFR and antecedents of perceptual specific curiosity. On the

one hand, we can connect them with the nature of VFR. That is, novelty and complexity directly refer to the intrinsic characteristics of VFR. On the other hand, functions of VFR are related to uncertainty and cognitive dissonance. By giving more information about the product than an e-catalog, VFR can affect uncertainty for example by reducing the perceived risk (Beck and Crié, 2013) and may increase conflict with prior information. Thus we expect that specific curiosity could be increased by environmental new sales aids like VFR. In line with this, we propose Hypothesis 1.

H1. The presence of a VFR on a website (environmental new sales aid) increases perceptual specific curiosity about the product.

2.2. The effects of virtual fitting rooms on consumers’ patronage intentions

Literature on the intent to patronize showed that this variable may be affected by store atmosphere (Kotler, 1973) and services provide by retailers (Baker et al., 2002). As “e-atmospherics tools” for the store (Poncin and Ben Mimoun, 2014), new sales aids could affect this variable. In this way, Bitner, Brown and Meuter (2000) demonstrated that a social new sales aid such as a virtual agent makes the experience more favorable and intense and therefore increases the quality of experience and patronage intention (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). However, they focused on a social aid. Thus, we suggest that VFR, as an environmental new sales aid, may also impact patronage intention. This idea generates two different hypotheses related to the context. While Hypothesis 2 concerns the online patronage intention, Hypothesis 3 focuses on offline patronage intention.

H2. The presence of a VFR on a website (environmental new sales aid) increases the intent to patronize the online retailer.

H3. The presence of a VFR on a website (environmental new sales aid) increases the intent to patronize the real store.

2.3. The effects of virtual fitting rooms on consumers’ purchase intentions

Research already improves effect of environmental new sales aids on online purchase intention. For example, Li et al. (2002) showed that a 3D presentation of products impacts significantly and positively the online purchase intention.

Clearly, as we try to maximize the knowledge about effects of environmental new sales aids, we would like to found the same effect for virtual fitting room. Moreover, no research indicates effects of such a tool on offline purchase intention in a cross-channel context. This leads to the following hypotheses.

H4. The presence of a VFR on a website (environmental new sales aid) increases online purchase intention.

H5. The presence of a VFR on a website (environmental new sales aid) increases offline purchase intention.

2.4. Hypotheses regarding the mechanism engaged by the presence of Virtual Fitting Room

To deeply explore the effects of VFR on exploratory behavior, we choose to understand the underlying mechanism engaged in the presence of such a tool on a website. First, we know that curiosity is a determinant of the exploratory behavior (Berlyne, 1950). The more consumer’s specific curiosity is stimulated, the more exploratory behavior is intense (Swaminathan, 2003). Second, literature showed that the intent to patronize is a major variable to explain the exploratory behavior. Based on these two ideas, we expect that the perceptual specific curiosity about the product may impact positively the patronage intention. Furthermore, prior results showed the effect of

² <http://www.digitasbi.com/news/global/m-commerce-social-media-and-ropo-research-online-purchase-offline-lead-retail-trends-according-to-digitasbis-global-survey/>.

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