Sensory marketing and consumer behavior: The role of tactile experiences in the cosmetics sector in Morocco.

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Abstract :

In a context of increasing digitalization, sensory marketing—particularly haptic marketing plays an important role in shaping consumer behavior. This study investigates the impact of tactile experiences on purchasing decisions in the Moroccan cosmetics sector. Three core dimensions are examined: interpersonal contact, physical product handling, and digital in-store experiences.

A quantitative survey was conducted with a sample of consumers (n = 101) who had previously interacted with a well-known Moroccan skincare brand. Data were collected through structured questionnaires distributed in beauty institutes and via social media platforms. The analysis employed the Chi-square test to assess the relationships between the identified variables and consumer behavior.

The findings show that digital experience and interpersonal interaction significantly influence consumer decision-making, while physical product handling, although less decisive, remains an important factor. The study highlights the value of integrating sensory and digital strategies to enhance customer engagement and brand loyalty in the cosmetics industry.

INTRODUCTION

Sensory marketing holds a pivotal role within the strategic arsenal of companies navigating today's highly competitive marketplace. In an era where discerning customers demand exceptional experiences, sensory marketing aids brands in establishing a distinctive identity that not only stands out but also resonates with the audience. Touch, a cornerstone of sensory perception, has gained renewed attention in consumer behavior studies. This tactile engagement is crucial for creating a memorable customer journey, especially as it compensates for the loss of direct product interaction through innovative digital solutions.

With technological advancements reshaping every facet of life, including distribution channels, it is essential for the senses and digital tools to coexist synergistically. Such an integration allows brands to interact more intimately. foster recollection, build loyalty, and stimulate creativity to redefine customer experiences. Tactile marketing extends beyond mere product handling; it encompasses interpersonal interactions, environmental factors, and tactile engagement with point-of-sale elements, embodying the multi-faceted nature of haptic experiences.

Touch is necessary to validate certain material properties, such as hardness, temperature, texture and weight. The motivation to touch the product before purchase is stronger, for example, consumers are more likely to touch an item of clothing in the store, which varies in texture and weight, so it is not surprising to see consumers touching fruits and vegetables in the supermarket to determine their firmness and texture. haptic perceptions are even of greater importance than visual product inspection, (Schifferstein ,2006) price, (Citrin et al.,2003), or product information such as fabric labels, (Workman, 2009). Thus, products where physical inspection is permitted prior to purchase and tend to be preferred to those where touch is not possible, particularly when touch is a discriminating factor in the final evaluation of a product (e.g., towels, rugs, etc.). Similarly, the possibility of touching a product would increase the proportion of impulse purchases when the stimulus is neutral or positive. Some authors go so far as affirming that, in the case of a neutral or positive haptic.

Recent research underscores the significant impact of sensory stimuli on consumer behavior, particularly in enhancing product perception and decision-making. According to Krishna and Aydınoğlu (2017), the strategic employment of sensory cues, such as tactility, can evoke powerful emotional responses that influence purchasing intentions. This article endeavors to dissect the core components of haptic marketing, an important subset of sensory marketing. By

identifying the variables that govern tactile interactions, we can better understand their role in shaping consumer decisions.

Moreover, as Zha et al., (2021) suggest, the interplay of sensory elements contributes to forming a cohesive and impactful brand experience, which is vital for maintaining competitive advantage. By elucidating these variables, the study aims to furnish businesses with enhanced strategies to exploit tactile interactions as a form of sensory marketing, thereby elevating the overall customer experience and improving brand affinity.

Studies has confimed the importance of touching for consumer as far as it amplifies the perception of belonging and owning the product, and favorably influencing its monetary evaluation (Peck & Barger, 2012). Hence it is important to encourage product contact in retail stores by a representative with demonstrators. In the same way, free product trial periods should be offered to compensate for the absence of touching for online purchases and thus optimize these sales. The challenge now lies as to what are the main variables of haptic marketing that impacts customers decision-making. Hence, this study was carried out, to study the impact of those variables on consumer behavior and their impact on consumer attitudes, so we can take advantage from haptic marketing to influence consumer behavior in a digital age.

1. Literature review

In the current competitive environment, sensory and tactile marketing have become essential approaches for creatively engaging consumers. This section delves into recent developments in these areas based on existing studies. The objective is to understand the impact of haptic marketing on consumer behavior specially within the digital era.

1.1 Sensory marketing and tactile:

In today's competitive landscape, sensory and tactile marketing have emerged as pivotal strategies for engaging consumers in innovative ways.

Sensory marketing has gained recognition for its ability to create direct and immersive connections with consumers. Brands strategically leverage sensory techniques to engage consumer senses and foster brand loyalty. An area of significant development is the enhancement of digital marketing through multisensory approaches. Research shows that incorporating sensory elements into digital campaigns can substantially increase their effectiveness and appeal to audiences, making them more memorable and impactful. Building on this insight, existing theories in sensory marketing emphasize the important role of multisensory interactions (Nayak & Satpathy, 2024). It has been noted that a large portion of digital marketing strategies currently underutilizes tactile elements, which, if incorporated,

could greatly enhance consumer engagement. This observation suggests a re-evaluation of current marketing strategies to better include touch-based techniques.

However, many existing digital marketing strategies underutilize tactile elements—such as texture and physical interaction—that could dramatically heighten consumer engagement. This underscores the importance of reassessing current marketing tactics to better incorporate tactile experiences.

Tactile marketing, as a distinct facet, can manifest in various ways, focusing on enhancing consumer interaction with products and brands. Our analysis concentrates on a literature review exploring three primary forms of tactile interaction: interpersonal contact (Szocs et al., 2023), direct product engagement (Jiang et al., 2024), and tactile elements integrated within digital experiences (Batat, 2024). These components are critical in enhancing consumer perceptions and fostering deeper brand relationships. By emphasizing these facets, brands can not only differentiate themselves but also cater to the increasing consumer demand for authentic, multisensory experiences.

1.2 Interpersonal contact

Interpersonal contact encompasses all material interactions a customer experiences during their shopping visit, with particular emphasis on interactions with staff. Extensive research highlights the significant role of these interactions in shaping human perception and attitudes across various contexts.

Salespeople's social behavior significantly influences consumer behavior within retail environments. Through diverse communication methods—both verbal and non-verbal—retail staff can greatly impact customer perceptions. Hornik (1992) highlighted how tactile interaction, such as a simple touch, can convey social status information, which recipients often interpret as a sign of high status. An earlier experiment by Silverthorne et al. (1972) found that participants rated geometric shapes as more aesthetically pleasing when they received a reassuring touch during the evaluation process. Similarly, studies demonstrated that a brief touch from a library staff member positively influenced students' evaluations of the library setting and staff, improving their mood.

In the hospitality sector, Olannye (2014) revealed that interpersonal communication, relational style, development of a relational atmosphere, and quality interactions are pivotal for marketing success and competitive advantage, specifically within the Nigerian hotel industry. Interpersonal contact here reflects constructs like appreciation, attention, affection, and

welcoming. Furthermore, Hubble et al., (1981)[1] explored the importance of touch in therapy, noting its positive impact on perceptions of therapist competence.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of interpersonal relationships extends into human resources, where robust interactions between customers and employees foster attachments that enhance customer loyalty. Some studies observed that these workplace interactions are influenced by individual personality traits. In this same context. Personality traits influence the dynamics of workplace interactions, highlighting the importance of personality in forming interpersonal relationships that enrich the professional environment. Rogers & Barber (2019) emphasize the impact of personality traits such as extraversion on stress management and employee engagement, which can have direct implications for customer satisfaction and workplace culture. In order to understand the benefits of these interactions,

Nevertheless, personal engagement often trumps digital interaction; however, as L. Heekyung and Y. Youjae (2021) found, social comfort mechanisms in digital realms promote a preference for self-service technologies, overcoming the lack of empathy found in face-to-face interactions. Nonetheless, a service provider's persuasive communication can enhance interpersonal contact, amplifying its benefits and mitigating potential drawbacks.

L. Heekyung, Y.Youjae (2021), revealed through their study the role of social comfort as an underlying mechanism behind digital customers' preference for self- service technology over interpersonal contact. self-service technology induces lack of empathy with customer needs and fulfillment of the consumer need for caring. moderating role of the service provider's persuasive intent that can increase the benefit and reduce the drawback of interpersonal contact.

In summary, the pivotal role of interpersonal contact in shaping consumer perceptions and experiences underscores its significance in tactile marketing. Whether through retail interactions, or in therapeutic and hospitality settings, interpersonal connections profoundly influence customer attitudes and satisfaction. The ability of salespeople and staff to leverage both verbal and non-verbal cues enhances their impact, fostering trust and loyalty among consumers.

Additionally, the integration of interpersonal relationships with personality traits highlights the complexity of human interactions in professional environments. While digital self-service technologies offer convenience and efficiency, they often lack the empathetic connection

provided by personal engagement. This underscores the need for service providers to implement persuasive communication strategies that enhance interpersonal contact, maximizing benefits and addressing the limitations of digital interfaces.

1.3 The handling of the product

Product handling is the first point of contact with the customer, so it is important to review the various studies that have been conducted on the impact of handling products in consumer experience, and product evaluation. During instances of purchase, touch plays a pivotal role in fulfilling both utilitarian and hedonic consumer motives (Peck, 2010) , touch sensations are important for positioning, and transmitting information about the brand iidentity: Fabric intimacy, stone; solidity, wood; warmth, and iron technicality.

Numerous studies showed that touching a product increases feelings of psychological ownership, with imagined touch found to be equipotent in eliciting ownership feelings as actual touch (see Peck & Barger, 2012; Peck & Shu, 2009), which form a positive impact on product evaluation.

In order to study the importance of touching for humans perception, Peck and Childers (2003), showed through his study that confidence in judgment is higher among individuals who have the opportunity to touch the product (sweater) during its evaluation, a similar study was conducted by McCabe and Nowlis (2003) that has studied the impact of haptic attributes on consumer behavior and show that products with salient material properties (clothing and carpets) are preferred in retail environments that allow physical inspection of these products, inversely, Barriers to tactile experience have the consequence of decreasing confidence in products and increasing the level of frustration of consumers who have a relatively high need to touch. (Peck and Childers ,2003)

Zampini et al. (2006) tried to find out if the perceived roughness of the product is influenced by the texture of the handle used to hold it (handle of a deodorant stick), in order to highlight the effect of the haptic experience in the evaluation of products.

Being responsible for affecting consumers perceptions and evaluations, product handling is important. Touch is the focus point, both in practical and emotional motivations. Tactile interactions can increase consumers' perception of ownership and have a positive impact on their overall evaluation of products.

Having the chance to touch and feel products adds to confidence and preference, while removing/limiting touch adds to insecurity and frustration. This calls for brands to evaluate their strategies and develop ways to allow consumers to interact by providing tactile

experiences which in turn increase consumer satisfaction and a healthy brand connection, focusing on the importance of touch in the retail and marketing strategies.

1.4 Digital experience

With the advent of digital technology, the contact with the product is becoming more and more limited, so it is important to study the influence of digital supports on consumer experience.

Based on the absence of haptic stimuli in the e- distribution, Poncin, I. Marion.G (2010), shows through his research that the absence of direct contact with the product hinders the immersion process, as a result, alters satisfaction and purchase intentions of consumers. Same study proved that the need for touch in a virtual environment has a negative impact on purchasing behavior, advanced that the need of touch would negatively influence the online purchase Citrin.A et al (2003).

The combination of classic, in-store retail, with digital technologies and platforms, will simply do what is more important in a business – to serve clients as good as possible, This is just an opportunity to grow for retailers with a strong business sense. Direct touch is increasingly encouraged as a mean to access online; Namely, 'direct touch' interfaces such as touchscreen laptops and touchscreen tablets – as opposed to 'indirect touch' alternatives with a touchpad or mouse – are quickly becoming the primary means of accessing content online, Brasel & Gips (2015).

Haptic touch is now a sensation which can be engaged in mobile and digital retail settings and provides an important foundation for future research. (Mulcahy & Riedel, 2018).

To engage with advertised products, new haptic technologies in smartphones and tablets enable consumers to tilt, tap or shake their phone to gain and provide information throughout their mobile retail advertising experiences. For example, 3D Touch, a technology developed by Apple Inc., enables users to distinguish between different levels of force being applied to surfaces to enable users another form of informational input (Apple Inc, 2018), haptic touch showed its effectiveness in improving purchase intention through mobile retail advertising.

In spite of evidence indicating that changes in interfaces dramatically alter how accessed content is perceived, research into the influence of touch interfaces on online consumer behavior is at present limited, (Brasel & Gips, 2015 ; Rokeby, 1998).

In the cosmetic sector, the nuanced interplay between interpersonal interactions, tactile product engagement, and digital in-store experiences significantly influences consumer decision-making. Personal connections, fostered through direct interactions with staff, can create a sense

of trust and loyalty, enhancing the overall customer experience. The tactile aspect of product engagement allows consumers to make more informed choices, aligning their preferences with perceived quality and satisfaction. Meanwhile, digital in-store experiences provide convenience and expanded informational resources, accommodating the evolving preferences of technologically savvy consumers. Together, these elements form a comprehensive approach that appeals to the diverse needs of modern consumers, ultimately guiding their purchase decisions and fostering brand loyalty in a competitive market. By skillfully integrating these diverse interaction modes, cosmetic brands can effectively cater to the multifaceted expectations of their clientele.

2. Definition of model variables and concepts

At this stage, we will highlight the three selected variables—interpersonal contact, product handling, and digital experience—to structure our econometric analysis around three hypotheses (H1, H2, H3). This approach aims to address our research question: **What is the impact of haptic marketing on consumer behavior, and to what extent does it influence consumer attitudes?**

1.2 Concept of Hypothesis

Consumer behavior is a central variable in various previously studied models, notably by Silverthorne, Noreen, Hunt Rota (1972), L. Heekyung, and Y. Youjae (2021), as well as Terblanche & Taljaard (2018). These works have largely highlighted the importance of interpersonal interactions and quality perceptions in shaping consumer behavior.

Our first hypothesis revolves around the idea that interpersonal contact may have a significant influence on consumer behavior. To verify this hypothesis, we will conduct a statistical analysis using the Chi-square test, which is relevant for exploring associations between categorical variables. This will allow us to assess whether there is indeed a significant relationship between these two aspects of consumer behavior. **H1: Interpersonal contact has a significant influence on consumer behavior.**

Regarding product handling, various theoretical models, such as those developed by Peck & Barger (2012), McCabe and Nowlis (2003), and Shu and Peck (2009), suggest that physical interaction with a product strongly influences the perception of its quality. These studies reveal that the way a product is handled can change the evaluations consumers make of its quality. We thus postulate that the handling of a product affects consumers' quality perception and will use the Chi-square test to examine the strength of this correlation. **H2: The handling of a product has a significant influence on consumer behavior.**

Finally, we examine consumer appreciation for digital experiences, based on existing models explored by Garnier & Poncin (2010), and Citrin.A et al. (2003). These studies demonstrate that digital experiences have a significant impact on consumer satisfaction and loyalty. **H3: The digital experience has a significant influence on consumer behavior.**

For this part of our study, we focus on a specific case in the cosmetics institute sector, concentrating on a brand recognized for adopting innovative practices and digital marketing focused on sensory experience. This case study is chosen for its relevance, notably for tactile experience.

3. Methodology to test the validity and reliability of variables

3.1 Data collection method:

The field study involved customers who had previously used products and services from a renowned skincare brand offering a range of services such as spa treatments, massages, and skincare. The survey design included four key areas: interpersonal contact, product handling, digital experiences at retail locations, featuring 17 multiple-choice questions and a sample size of n=101. (Study conducted in Morocco)

The survey was distributed to beauty institutes affiliated with the brand in Morocco, after obtaining necessary authorization from the local franchise holder. Consultants at the institutes facilitated the distribution and was also promoted on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) through beauty-focused pages.

3.2 Data processing methodology:

The responses were collected using an online platform to facilitate the digital distribution of the survey. Data analysis was conducted using statistical software tools that enabled the cross-tabulation of variables (H1 & H2). The Chi-square test was utilized to examine correlations between specific variables for each question through bivariate analysis, while univariate analysis was used to validate the third hypothesis focusing on the use of digital media at points of sale.

This survey aimed to explore the impact of various factors on consumer behavior in the cosmetics sector, such as interpersonal contact, tactile interaction with products, and digital in-store experiences. The objectives include validating our hypotheses.

Validating these hypotheses will help discern the factors influencing customer preferences for the brand as well as evaluate the impact of digital experience combined with tactile interaction on purchase decisions within retail environments. This investigation addresses the question:

How do interpersonal interactions, tactile product engagement, and digital in-store experiences collectively shape consumer decision-making in the cosmetic sector?

4. Results, discussions and critical issues:

The majority of our respondents are women, which aligns with Moroccan cultural norms where men prioritizing skincare are relatively uncommon, with only 14.86% showing interest. The brand places significant emphasis on interpersonal contact, investing heavily in training beauticians to be knowledgeable about products and skilled in massage techniques. However, our findings suggest that factors such as friendly reception and courtesy may weigh more heavily in customers' evaluations than the competence of beauticians. This highlights the importance of considering these interpersonal elements to enhance service quality, despite our results indicating that customers often base their brand choice on criteria like reputation, innovation, product quality, and the overall quality of care.

The data revealed no correlation between interpersonal contact and customer decision-making, as examined in the first hypothesis. Moreover, the second hypothesis highlighted that while lesser attention seemed directed toward the product's texture, these factors remain crucial components that should not be overlooked in marketing strategies. Although interpersonal and direct product contact are supplementary criteria, failing to recognize their significance could negatively affect brand image. Conversely, effectively managing these interactions can enhance customer loyalty.

Analysis of the third hypothesis disclosed that 87% of customers value the digital support provided in stores. This suggests that digital tools are appreciated as they facilitate a novel consumer experience and enable easy access to product and service information. Integrating these digital tools along with a robust online presence helps the brand connect with customers. This approach not only differentiates the brand from competitors but also adds value by demonstrating a commitment to meeting and responding to customer needs continuously.

In summary, interpersonal contact, product handling, and digital tactile experiences are three intertwined components. The strategic combination of these elements, centered around ongoing customer need assessment, will form an innovative and effective marketing strategy for the brand.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our research offers an explanatory model exploring the connections among haptic marketing, interpersonal contact, and digitalization within beauty institutes. Drawing upon several theoretical frameworks, we developed various hypotheses that guided our empirical investigation. Despite constraints such as limited time for sample expansion and the sparse existing research on the haptic aspect of sensory marketing, we gleaned valuable insights from our selected sample.

The analysis of our case study results highlighted that tactile marketing is developing in Morocco, and digital supports are increasingly being accepted and preferred by consumers. We observed that Moroccan customers seek innovative and novel experiences in-store, which is evident from their preference for interpersonal contact that emphasizes engagement and informative interactions over merely relying on the beauticians' competence. Moreover, the digital support offered in-store enhances their preference for rich experiences rather than solely focusing on product quality, which still remains a crucial factor in purchase decisions and customer loyalty.

Our findings indicate that effective product handling is perceived as less critical than interpersonal connection and digital engagement. Customers value the sense of ownership and belonging associated with physically interacting with a product, appreciating the experiential aspect more than the texture alone. This further underscores the importance of the experience derived from holding and interacting with the product.

Despite technological advancements, traditional interpersonal interactions and tactile product handling continue to be highly valued by customers across various sectors. The presence of knowledgeable sales staff at physical locations can provide personalized advice and guidance, resulting in benefits for both the brand and the consumer. This necessity highlights the ongoing importance of staff training and development, particularly in cosmetics, where innovation leads through product advancements, new textures, and enhanced care techniques. Brands should leverage haptic technologies and explore immersive experiences using three-dimensional, virtual, and augmented reality to differentiate themselves.

In conclusion, our study illuminates the significant role of digital support, interpersonal contact, and product interaction in influencing customer behavior and decision-making. Collectively, these variables contribute to the overarching theme of enriching customer experiences. Future research could expand upon these findings by incorporating larger datasets and establishing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure the impact of these variables, enhancing insights

into strategic brand differentiation and customer loyalty within the ever-evolving technological landscape.

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