

Consumer evaluation of products perceived as being contaminated: The role of mental imagery and disgust on product evaluation and purchase intentions

In most retail environments, the customer is able to handle products, feel their weight, and try the item; in other words have a tactile experience. According to Mehrabian (1981), touch is a behavioral approach to a product that may induce a tendency, a preference and a more favorable attitude. The literature distinguishes between diagnostic and non-diagnostic touch. On the one hand, diagnostic touch refers to a direct source of information about product qualities by touching the product itself. On the other hand, non-diagnostic touch does not refer directly to the product (e.g. touching packaging) but raises inferences about general product characteristics. Previous research also distinguishes between "autotelic" touch which corresponds to the search for pleasure and a consumption experience (hedonic motivation) and "instrumental" touch which corresponds to a search for information about product characteristics (utilitarian motivation). Each of these types of touch has inspired a small number of works, most of them concerning diagnostic touch, mainly in the food sector and more generally in the retail environment. Generally, previous research shows an effect of touch on product evaluation (Guéguen and Jacob, 2006, Krishna and Morrin, 2008).

However, this freedom to touch products has its downside. Indeed, even if the consumer likes to touch products, he is not appreciative if the product has been handled by other customers. This ambivalence concerning touch is a major problem for managers in retail outlets. It raises the question of how to allow consumers to touch products while guaranteeing that they are devoid of any contact with others. Marketing research takes up this question and is, as a result, showing an interest in the effect of "contamination" (Argo, Dahl, and Morales, 2006).

This dissertation focuses on the concept of product contamination. It aims to understand variables that reflect the impact of the perception of contamination on consumer evaluation and purchase intention concerning a product. This study has three objectives: (1) to show the impact of the perception of contamination on evaluation and purchase intention concerning a product, (2) to highlight underlying mental imagery and disgust mechanisms (3) to identify individual and situational variables that may moderate the effect of the perception of contamination.

(1) Impact of the perception of contamination on evaluation and purchase intentions concerning a product

Few studies have focused on this concept, however, Argo, Dahl, and Morales (2006) show that some environmental cues (sales staff, other consumers ...) indicate to the consumer if a product was touched. These environmental cues increase the salience of the contamination and the consumers' perception of contamination risk. Purchase intentions are an interesting variable to consider because consumer behaviour usually arises from them. Many studies have found a positive significant relationship between purchase intentions and purchase behavior (Morwitz, Steckel and Gupta, 2007), but the strength of this relationship can vary, depending on the product category.

In addition to intention to purchase, we will focus on consumer evaluation of the product perceived as contaminated. For the evaluation of products, we use five semantic differential scales of seven steps with the following items: good / bad, positive / negative, desirable / undesirable, favorable / unfavorable and loved / hated.

(2) The role of mental imagery and disgust

Mental imagery

We will determine how mental imagery, associated with the perception of contamination, affects the formation of judgments and intention to purchase a product deemed contaminated. Indeed, previous research has shown that touching a product creates tactile sensations (Underhill, 2000), emotions (Peck and Childers, 2003) and mental images in one or more sensory modalities (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory or taste). The imagery may be defined as resembling "*perceptual experience, but occurs in the absence of the appropriate external stimuli*" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). According to Betts (1909) there are different sensory modalities, an image can be visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory and/or sensory-motor. Visual imagery is the most studied modality because it seems to be dominant among individuals. In this work we will focus only on visual and tactile mental images. Imagery also has several dimensions, we will explore: clarity, vividness, quantity of the images, the ease of formation of mental images and the valence.

Disgust

Research shows that disgust is a concept that usually accompanies the perception of contamination. For Rozin and Fallon (1987), disgust is defined as an emotion. Angyal (1941) defines disgust as avoidance of oral incorporation of a certain substance. Disgust is a universal human feeling, regardless of culture, and is associated with similar facial expressions (Mesquita and Frijda, 1992). The notion of disgust is innate and occurs in the social framework. Humans feel disgust for such things as faeces, vomit or blood, but also

express disgust at situations such as theft, tyranny and incest (Rozin et al. 2000). Research converges to consider that disgust extends to social interaction, immoral acts such as incest can be judged as disgusting. Disgust may also be interpersonal and refers to a reaction of repugnance which may arise simply at the idea of the unknown, or of making contact with someone who is hated. Based on the works of Rozin and Fallon (1987), Rozin and Nemeroff (1990) and Rozin, Millman and Nemeroff (1986), we explore the feeling of disgust felt towards products touched by others. We posit that disgust should induce negative feelings toward a product and result in low purchase intent.

(3) Individual and situational variables that may moderate the effect of the perception of contamination

We will focus on two situational variables: price reduction and the role of packaging, and an individual variable: the ability of mental imagery.

Previous studies (Argo et al., 2006) have highlighted that negative contamination generates more highly negative product evaluations. However, we can ask whether a physical compensation cue (price reduction) would impact evaluation of the product perceived as contaminated and induce an impulse purchase. The variable "price" is present with two modalities: a price without any reduction and a price enhanced by a reduction. Thus, a product considered contaminated might be evaluate less negatively by the consumer if the listed price is considered to be lower. Similarly, intent to purchase this product may also increase. The handling of this compensation cue is relevant because if our hypothesis is confirmed, it would provide managers with a solution- albeit partial - to problems related to contamination.

Similarly, we will focus on the role of packaging. Previous studies have highlighted the technical and communication functions of packaging. Within the technical functions, we find for example, ease of transporting the product. One of the essential functions of packaging is protection. Indeed, packages aim to protect products. Product protection is related to all types of external aggression that the product may suffer. A product must be protected from aggressions such as physical shocks, cold or heat. Packaging also plays a protective role against the exchange of materials (from outside to inside the product, and vice versa). In our study, we will focus our attention on the protective function of packaging and see how it may play a moderating role in our model. Here we propose that the presence of packaging (versus no packaging) could induce less negative feelings and lead to better product evaluation and purchase intentions.

In addition to these two situational variables, we will discuss the role of an individual variable: the ability to create mental imagery. This ability varies from one individual to another and is related to the vividness of mental images and the person's ability to control their mental images. For Gordon (1949), the ability to create mental imagery refers to the ability to maintain mental images in memory and make them voluntarily undergo specific transformations.

Research questions

In summary, we will highlight variables that reflect the impact of perception of contamination by the consumer on their evaluation and purchase intentions concerning a product. We will try to show that these responses are formed through mental imagery processes and are influenced by such variables as disgust, but also by product pricing. Our work has four research questions. First, we want to see if the perception of contamination negatively affects evaluation and purchase intentions of the contaminated product. Second, it is essential to understand whether mental imagery and disgust play a role in the perception of contamination. Third, we also ask if the ability of mental imagery could play a moderating role on disgust and mental imagery. Finally, we want to know if price reductions and / or the presence of packaging can offset the perception of contamination.

Methodology

Prior to experimentation, qualitative research will be conducted to understand the underlying mechanisms, determine the most important individual variables and identify product characteristics that moderate the effect of contamination. Given the objectives of this dissertation, experimentation in situ (in store) is probably most relevant: it will compare the impact of products perceived as contaminated versus uncontaminated on evaluation and purchase intentions. To enhance external validity, relatively comparable categories of products will be considered. Besides the choice of these stimuli, we will focus on the salience of environmental cues; our design will include three conditions: vision, perceptible traces and no environmental cues. Under the "vision" condition the consumer will be submitted to the vision of a product being touched by another customer. Under the "perceptible traces" condition the consumer will not see a person directly touch the product but cues will show that the stimulus has been manipulated. Finally, the "no environmental indices" condition will be the control condition.

Implications

This dissertation will help researchers and retailers better understand the impact of perception of product contamination on the evaluation and purchase intentions of a product. Specifically, the goal of this work is to contribute to understanding the formation of consumer responses: i.e., Are consumers influenced more by mental imagery? By disgust? And under what conditions? (Role of individual variables and price)

From a managerial point of view, this project will enable retailers to develop strategies to limit the perception of contamination and / or its effects on product evaluation in self-service. Indeed, the challenge is to give consumers the option of touching products because of the positive influence on their assessment of products (Argo, Dahl, and Morales, 2006) but at the same time reduce the perception of contamination.