SYNOPOSIS

The continued widespread growth of non-traditional retailing such as Internet and television shopping channels has spurred researchers to evaluate the importance of touch in a purchase decision. Evidence has demonstrated that a majority of consumers prefer to touch and feel a product before purchasing it which poses a significant challenge to online buying (Lawson 2006). The consumers generally touch a product to seek information, to understand and to gain knowledge, and may be to excite their senses. This information seeking behavior is referred as haptic information processing which takes place while assessing tactile (e.g., haptic) inputs of a product.

In several situations, haptic information is not accessible; consumers often infer product quality consistent with their prior evaluations. Hence, consumers would rely on their prior knowledge in evaluating the product (Brucks 1985; Hong and Strenthal 2010). While the role of consumer knowledge has been extensively examined in previous research to explain differences in consumer information seeking and choice behavior, little is known of its moderating role in the relationship of attitudinal intentions in haptic information processing. This is an intriguing issue, particularly for haptic and non-haptic products that consumers generally evaluate in touch and no-touch environments. Consumers are likely to depend on their prior consumption experiences in forming the expectations and evaluations of such products. These expectations are influenced by consumers’ knowledge about a product which can have effect on their sensory perceptions (Deliza and MacFIE, 1996). It is reasonable to expect that consumer knowledge about a product is likely to moderate the relationship of attitudinal intentions in haptic information processing. Review of literature is carried out to come up with the following research questions.
First, how do consumers evaluate haptic and non-haptic products in a specified purchase environment? Second, does a specified purchase environment affect cognitive and affective responses across haptic and non-haptic products? Third, do cognitive and affective responses mediate the relationships between purchase environment with overall evaluation and purchase intention of haptic and non-haptic products? Fourth, do individuals who are high in need for touch (NFT) exhibit cognitive and affective responses differently in a given purchase environment while evaluating haptic and non-haptic products? Fifth and finally, does consumer knowledge about haptic and non-haptic products affect the relationships between purchase environment and consumer responses?

To examine these research questions, a comprehensive conceptual model is developed based on the literature review and Stimulus-Organism-Response theory. The conceptual model leads to the formulation of specific research hypotheses. The model and hypotheses are examined using data generated in two phases of the study conducted. Before conducting the study, two pretests have been carried out to identify one haptic and one non-haptic product. Based on these two pretests, sweater as a haptic product and DVD player as a non-haptic product have been selected for use in the two phases of the study.

In the first phase, a structured questionnaire was administered to elicit responses from a group of student subjects. The questionnaire comprised measures for consumer’s subjective and objective knowledge about sweater and DVD player, NFT, purchase involvement and demographic variables. Phase II of the study was conducted after six weeks. The participants were assigned randomly generated numbers which facilitated random assignment in the second phase of the study.
In the second phase, a two-factorial experimental design study was conducted. The first factor was purchase environment which consisted of three levels, namely, touch, no-touch, and print environments. The second factor was product type consisting of two levels, namely, sweater (‘haptic’) and DVD player (‘non-haptic’). Six different experimental conditions were developed. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the six experimental conditions using random numbers assigned to them in the first phase of the study. After evaluating either a sweater or a DVD player, subjects filled out a structured questionnaire consisting of measures for realism and manipulation checks, cognitive and affective responses, overall evaluation, purchase intention, and the idea about true purpose of the study.

251 responses were used for data analysis after excluding the incomplete questionnaires from two phases of the study. Confirmatory factor analysis was carried out to validate the psychometric properties of each scale used in the data collection process. ANOVA, ANCOVA, MANCOVA, and independent sample t-tests were employed to test the conceptual model and the research hypotheses. ANOVA and independent sample t-tests were used to examine the realism and manipulation checks. MANCOVA was carried out to examine the main and interaction effects of purchase environment and product type on cognitive response, affective response, overall evaluation, and purchase intention. ANCOVA was used to check the mediating roles of cognitive and affective responses between purchase environment and overall evaluation and purchase intention for haptic and non-haptic products. Independent sample t-tests were carried out to examine the differences between individuals who were high on NFT and consumer knowledge and individuals who were low on NFT and consumer knowledge respectively in terms of cognitive, affective, overall evaluation, and purchase intention across purchase environment and product type.

vi
The data analysis indicates that respondents perceive relatively high and equal levels of involvement in purchasing sweater and DVD player, used as haptic and non-haptic products in the present study. Experimental conditions are perceived realistic and manipulations checks work as intended. None of the respondents were able to guess the true purpose of the study.

The findings of the study indicate that: (1) for haptic and non-haptic products, significant effect of purchase environment on cognitive response, affective response, overall evaluation, and purchase intention is found; (2) for haptic product, cognitive and affective responses mediate the relationship between purchase environment and overall evaluation; (3) NFT moderates the relationship between purchase environment and cognitive response only for haptic product; (4) subjective knowledge of haptic and non-haptic products has positive significant impact on cognitive response; (5) subjective knowledge of haptic product is also found to have positive impact on affective response; and (6) objective knowledge of haptic and non-haptic products has positive significant impact on cognitive response.

Overall, findings suggest that consumers with high level of subjective and objective knowledge about haptic product show higher cognitive response, affective response, and favorable overall evaluation in touch environment than in no-touch and print environments. In such cases, managers should encourage those consumers to touch the product in a retail setting. Therefore, it is required that managers should segment the potential markets based on the consumers’ knowledge levels about haptic and non-haptic products. Moreover, the dissertation details theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and future research avenues in its concluding chapter.

**Keywords:** haptic information processing; consumer knowledge; cognitive; affective; overall evaluation