CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

*All our knowledge begins with the senses, proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason.* -Immanuel Kant

Consumers prefer to gather relevant information and experience the product during its evaluation. They can perform this activity knowingly or unknowingly as sensory organs continually gather information and experience sensation even when an individual does not make any conscious effort to do so. Indeed, consumers consciously and unconsciously gather information through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch that influences their marketplace choices. For example, it has been argued that unique identity of a brand can be built by providing delightful sensory experience to consumers (Schmitt 1999; Lindstrom 2006). Research has recognized the need to probe how each of the five sensory organs may influence consumer perception of an object. Early research efforts have begun to show the effects of sensory inputs such as the impact of visual/volume perception (Chandon and Wansink 2002; Wansink and van Ittersum 2003), aesthetic and color (Folkes and Matta 2004; Gorn et. al 2004), listening to music (Macinnis and Park 1991), smell (Joy and Sherry 2003; Morrin and Ratneshwar 2003), and touch (Peck and Childers 2003a) on consumers’ perception of an object. However, research on the impact of gathering information through touch (‘haptic information processing’) on product evaluation remains limited.

1.1 Haptic Perception

The word haptic comes from a Greek term meaning ‘able to lay hold of’ (Gibsson 1962). Haptic is to make a haptic perception of an object. Haptic perception relates to the assessment of
the object by touching. It can be formed using passive or active touching of the object. Passive touch occurs when individuals do not consciously touch the object to gain information about it. For example, a cat rubs to an individual’s leg. In such cases, individuals do not actively collect the information to evaluate an object using their haptic system. In active touch, individuals make perception of the object based on both the movement of the hand and the object being perceived. It is an exploratory sense and at times referred to as tactile scanning (Lederman and Klatzky 1998).

The present research focuses only on active touching of an object, where the individuals deliberately use haptic system to collect information from the environment. Active touch involves the overall haptic system. The haptic system is a perceptual system that uses information gleaned from receptors in the skin, muscles, tendons, and joints (Lederman and Klatzky 1998). This information seeking using haptic system is referred as haptic information processing. It usually takes place while assessing tactile (e.g., haptic) inputs of an object. Tactile inputs generally vary in terms of texture, hardness, temperature, and weight of the object. These inputs facilitate haptic exploration during the object evaluation (Peck and Childers 2003a).

1.2 Significance of Haptic Information Processing in Marketing

The continued widespread growth of non-traditional retailing such as Internet, catalogue, and television shopping channels has spurred researchers to evaluate the importance of touching a product in 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 the product to seek information, to understand and to gain knowledge, and may be to excite their senses. A general observation of
the consumers’ behavior in any shopping center indicates that they evaluate the tactile input of a product by touching and arrive at a purchase decision. For example, consumers touch the fabrics of apparels and hold a mobile handset in order to primarily feel texture and weight of the respective products. Sometimes, touching the product gives a sense of possession even if consumers do not plan to purchase it (Peck and Shu 2009; Underhill 1999).

For the products which are high on tactile inputs such as apparel and tennis racket, consumers assign significant importance to tactile information in evaluating texture and weight of the respective products in their decision process (Klatzky, Lederman and Matula, 1993). Thus, accessibility of the tactile information in touch environment positively affects consumers’ confidence in product evaluation (Peck and Childers, 2003a). Conversely, consumers do not show any significant difference between touch and no-touch environments in terms of purchase intention of non-haptic product (McCabe and Nowlis 2003).

In several situations, when haptic information is not accessible; consumers often infer product quality consistent with their prior evaluations. In such cases, consumers are likely to rely on their prior knowledge in evaluating the products (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 role in moderating the impact on 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 predict that consumer knowledge about a product is likely to moderate the relationships in haptic information processing.

Given the importance of examining the moderating role of consumer knowledge in haptic information processing, the present research expands our knowledge by answering several unanswered questions in consumer behavior literature. First, how do consumers evaluate haptic and non-haptic products in a given purchase environment? Second, does a given purchase environment positively (negatively) 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 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?

1.3 Dissertation Layout

The next chapter offers an overview of the literature on the role of haptic information processing and consumer knowledge in product evaluation. Chapter 3 presents literature gaps identified and research questions. In addition, it provides theoretical background for conceptual model that leads to the formulation of hypotheses. Chapter 4 details results of two pretests and outlines the methodology to collect data. Chapter 5 presents the results of the data analyzed and tests the hypotheses empirically. In Chapter 6, discussions of the theoretical and managerial implications of the results and suggestions for future research along with limitations of the present dissertation are presented.