

# **Need for touch and online consumer decision making: The moderating role of emotional states**

## **Extended abstract**

The sense of touch, or haptics, has long been recognized as an important source of information for consumers during product evaluation and appreciation (Yazdanparast and Spears, 2013). Most consumers need to touch and try products to acquire full, direct haptic information, especially before purchasing products with sensory attributes (Park *et al.*, 2012). This relates to the concept of need for touch (hereafter NFT).

As a starting point in reaching a definition, most theoreticians agree that NFT refers to consumers' preference for interacting physically with a product through the touch or haptic system in order to obtain production evaluation information (Jin and Phua, 2015). Consumers differ in their need to touch products in terms of motivations and preferences. According to Peck and Childers (2003a, 2003b), the instrumental dimension of NFT refers to the consumer's need to touch for achievement, characterized by an information search (e.g. a product's texture, form, hardness, temperature, or weight) from which, in turn, is inferred a product judgment (e.g. product quality, performance or functionality as well as the consumer's comfort or certainty in product judgment). In contrast, autotelic NFT refers to a consumer's need to touch for sensation and potential entertainment and the enjoyment value associated with shopping, and is focused on the sensory aspects of touch as an end in and of itself (Peck and Wiggins, 2011).

Emotional states, defined as primarily intrapersonal (i.e. feelings, states of arousal, or activation of certain motor patterns; Frijda, 1990), are considered a situational variable and are proposed to affect an individual's attitude and behavior. Suggestions to examine emotional states in research on online consumer shopping behavior have, however, gone largely unheeded. An attempt was made by Yazdanparast and Spears (2013) to investigate the moderating role of mood in the relationship between NFT and consumer responses. However, their research focused on transient emotions (i.e. negative affect is experienced as a result of the frustration of not being able to examine a product haptically) and emotional states prior to purchase were ignored. Specifically, the present study explores the effect of consumers' NFT and pre-purchase emotional states on their purchase decision making in an online shopping setting. The investigation further assesses the moderating role of pre-purchase emotional states in the

relationship between need for touch and online consumer decision making involving perceived quality, confidence in product judgment and intention to purchase. The following hypotheses are posited:

H1: Instrumental NFT influences consumer decision making; that is, the level of perceived quality (a), confidence in product judgment (b), and intention to purchase (c).

H2: Autotelic NFT influences consumer decision making; that is, the level of perceived quality (a), confidence in product judgment (b), and intention to purchase (c).

H3: For consumers with high instrumental NFT, PE influences their online decision making, involving the level of perceived quality (a), confidence in product judgment (b), and intention to purchase (c).

H4: For consumers with high autotelic NFT, PE influences their online decision making, involving the level of perceived quality (a), confidence in product judgment (b), and intention to purchase (c).

H5: For consumers with high instrumental NFT, NE influences their online decision making, involving the level of perceived quality (a), confidence in product judgment (b), and intention to purchase (c).

H6: For consumers with high autotelic NFT, NE influences their online decision making, involving the level of perceived quality (a), confidence in product judgment (b), and intention to purchase (c).

H7: PE moderates the effect of instrumental NFT on consumer online decision making, involving the level of perceived quality (a), confidence in product judgment (b), and intention to purchase (c).

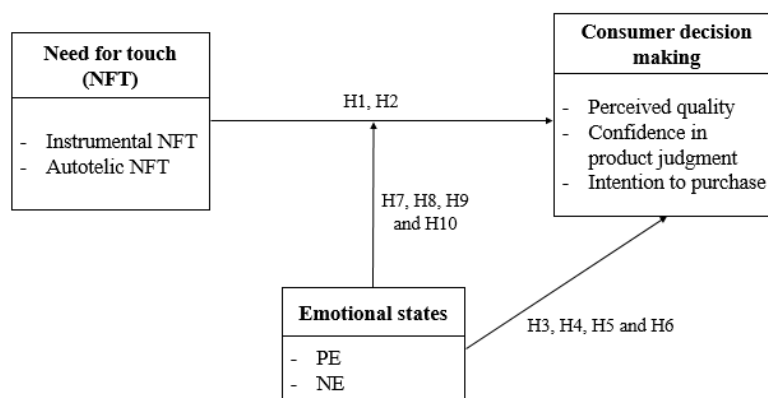
H8: PE moderates the effect of autotelic NFT on consumer online decision making, involving the level of perceived quality (a), confidence in product judgment (b), and intention to purchase (c).

H9: NE moderates the effect of instrumental NFT on consumer online decision making, involving the level of perceived quality (a), confidence in product judgment (b), and intention to purchase (c).

H10: NE moderates the effect of autotelic NFT on consumer online decision making, involving the level of perceived quality (a), confidence in product judgment (b), and intention to purchase (c).

The relationships hypothesized above are summarized graphically in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Hypothesized relationships between the study variables**



In the initial stage, the participants were randomly assigned to one of two design conditions: 150 students were assigned to induced PE vs. 150 participants to induced NE. Participants' emotional states were manipulated through the instructions in a questionnaire. The instructions were similar to those used by other researchers for this purpose (e.g. Qui and Yeung, 2008). Participants in the PE (vs. NE) condition were asked to read the following separate instructions: "Please identify a recent event that was very important and made you feel positive (vs. negative) whenever you thought about it. Imagine the experience in as much detail as possible and try to re-experience the feelings you had at the time, and then write down a description of those feelings and the events that elicited them.

After describing their personal experience, the participants were asked about the emotions they felt at that moment using scales from Watson and colleagues (1988, 1997; a seven-point scale ranging from "does not describe at all" to "describes a great deal".) in order to confirm the effectiveness of the emotion induction procedure. To assess these emotions, a procedure was used that was similar to that employed in previous research (Yazdanparast and Spears, 2013). For both the PE group and the NE group, the average of each participant's responses to the NE items was subtracted from the average of her/his responses to the PE items to provide an overall index of the PE (vs. NE) the participant was experiencing.

After completing the emotion manipulation task, participants were asked to read the following sweater purchase scenario: “Imagine that you are looking for a sweater on an e-retailer site and seeing one that you think might be a good choice. This particular sweater is only available online. The webpage presented conventional images of the product, along with the technical information. The e-retailer offers free delivery for online orders.” After reading the scenario, participants were given a questionnaire that asked about their perception of the quality of the sweater, their confidence in judging the product and willingness to buy the sweater. Next, under the guise of a separate study, an instrumental and autotelic NFT scale was administered. The effects of PE were examined in Model 1 and NE in Model 2, since PE and NE can operate independently in their impact on a consumer’s impression of a consumption experience (Ontes *et al.*, 1997; Zheng, 2019).

Autotelic NFT was found to be influential, leading to higher perceived product quality and greater product judgment confidence and intention to purchase, whereas instrumental NFT had no influence on consumer decision making. The study found that PE drives higher scores for consumer decision making regardless of the presence of instrumental or autotelic NFT, whereas NE was found to have no impact on consumer decision making when either instrumental NFT or autotelic NFT was present. It is interesting to note that there is a slight difference in the effect of PE on consumer decision making for high-instrumental NFT and high-autotelic NFT consumers.

Furthermore, the current investigation provides empirical support for the proposed moderating role of positive vs. negative emotional states prior to purchase between instrumental vs. autotelic NFT and the three decision making measures considered. The results demonstrate that the effectiveness of both instrumental and autotelic NFT on consumer decision making depends on negative emotional states but not on positive emotional states.

To gain deeper understanding of the interaction between NFT (instrumental vs. autotelic) and NE, the effect of NE on both confidence in product judgment and intention to purchase was further examined at the single levels of instrumental NFT using planned contrasts. In the same vein, the effect of instrumental NFT on both confidence in product judgment and intention to purchase at the single levels of NE was also examined. The results suggest that confidence in product judgment is influenced by NE when high levels of instrumental NFT are present, and by instrumental NFT when the levels of NE are low; intention to purchase is influenced by NE when high levels of instrumental NFT are present, and by instrumental NFT when the levels of

NE are both high and low. Furthermore, the effect of the levels of NE on intention to purchase at the single levels of autotelic NFT and the effect of autotelic NFT on intention to purchase at the single levels of NE were also examined using planned contrasts.

## Main references

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