Imagery Fluency and Fashion Involvement in Online Apparel Shopping

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Introduction. Consumers often form mental images of future consumption situations with a product before purchasing, and this consumption imagery can impact consumer decision making. Along with imagery, imagery fluency, the ease with which an individual can imagine the consumption experience (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005), is another pivotal factor that can influence product preferences and purchase intention (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005). Imagery and imagery fluency can be particularly important in online apparel shopping because online consumers rely on the information provided on websites to indirectly experience products. Therefore, simulating product experiences with consumption imagery may alleviate this limitation and positively influence consumers' responses. However, little research examined the antecedents and consequences of imagery fluency in the online apparel shopping context. Acknowledging the gap, the current research investigates the impact of imagery fluency on consumers' evaluations in the online apparel shopping environment.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development. Imagery fluency literature suggests ease of imagery generation produces positive effects such as product preference (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005). Stimulus characteristics such as vividness of information can influence how easily one can imagine using a product. Information is vivid when emotionally interesting, concrete, and proximate in a sensory or spatial way (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005). Thus, vivid online information will facilitate online shoppers' imagery generation (**H1**). In addition to stimulus characteristics, personality traits such as fashion involvement, the extent to which individuals view fashion as their important part of their life (O'Cass, 2004), may also affect imagery fluency. High-involvement consumers are more likely to process product information fast and analyze it critically, and form beliefs and attitudes than low-involvement consumers (Park & Young, 1986). Kim et al. (2002) found that consumers' responses to apparel advertisement differ based on their levels of fashion involvement because of their ability to elaborate on product advertising claims. Because high involvement consumers are more willing to process information, imagery fluency effect can be greater for them than low involvement consumers. Therefore, consumers with high fashion involvement (vs. low fashion involvement) will have (**H2a**) more positive product attitudes and (**H2b**) higher purchase intention when the apparel website facilitates high imagery fluency than low fluency. On the other hand, there will be no significant differences between the fluency conditions for consumers with low fashion involvement (**H3).**

Method. A 2(Imagery fluency: high vs. low) x 2(Fashion involvement: high vs. low) between-subject online experimental design was employed. Mock online apparel retailer's websites were created and used as stimuli. Jeans were chosen as the product because the pretest revealed that they are experience goods and it is relatively hard to imagine wearing them. Imagery fluency was manipulated by vividness of information. For high imagery fluency, sensory and experiential description (e.g., "feels like your second skin") was used. For low imagery fluency, objective and non-experiential information (e.g., "high rise waist", "30 ½" inseam") was used. Immediately after reading the product information, an imagery evoking prompt (i.e., imagine you are wearing…) was placed. Fifty seven female undergraduate students were recruited from a large Midwestern University. After reviewing the websites, they answered a questionnaire including imagery fluency, fashion involvement, perceived risk, attitude, and purchase intention.

Results. The manipulation of imagery fluency was successful (F= 4.02, p=.05), thereby supporting hypothesis 1. Participants were split into the high and the low fashion involvement groups at the median. Perceived risk was entered as a covariate in the analysis. MANCOVA results revealed a significant interaction between imagery fluency and fashion involvement for both product attitudes (F=7.37, p <.01) and purchase intention (F = 6.62, p <.05). As hypothesized, the high fashion involved group showed more positive product attitudes (t(29)=2.37, p <.05) and higher purchase intention (t(29)=2.30, p <.05) when they reviewed the website with high imagery fluency than the one with low imagery fluency. For the low fashion involved group, there were no significant differences between the conditions (p>.05). Therefore, all hypotheses were supported.

Discussion and Implications. The results of this study provide empirical evidence that imagery fluency affects products attitudes and purchase intention in the context of apparel online shopping, moderated by fashion involvement. Online apparel retailers, especially whose target customers are highly fashion-involved, are advised to facilitate imagery fluency in their websites by providing vivid, experiential product information.

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