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Need-For-Touch, Product Innovativeness, Gender and Product Knowledge: A Contextual Study on Consumers in Saudi Arabia

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This study extends earlier research on the role of Need-For-Touch on consumer behaviour. To be more precise, it focuses on investigating the role of *product innovativeness*, *opinion leadership*, and consumer *product-class knowledge* in understanding consumer's *Need-For-Touch.* A survey was conducted using a convenience sample of 128 males and 88 females, representing diverse demographics of Saudi Arabia, which was then analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The findings of this study contribute to consumer research, especially pre-choice aspects of consumer behaviour and attitudes, as well as consumer psychological market segmentation. The potential theoretical contribution of this study is reflected in the examination of new diverse relationships, which can be used as a basis for further studies. Moreover, the findings of this exploratory study will contribute significantly towards understanding consumer behaviour enabling accurate anticipation of consumer expectations and satisfying their inherent needs. Finally, a number of managerial implications for industry (packaging, communication and product-development) were suggested.

Key words: *Need-for-Touch, Sensory Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Gender, Saudi Arabia*

1.0 Introduction

Studies concerned with consumers' behaviour and the role of touch have gained interest in recent years (Balaji, Raghavan, & Subhash, 2011; Eklund & Helmefalk, 2018; Gallace & Spence 2014; Hulte´n, 2012; Peck & Wiggins, 2006; 2011; Ranaweera et al. 2021; Silva et al. 2021). Research in this area is conceptualised from the three domains utilising the Need-For-Touch scale, developed by Peck and Childers (2003). The first domain is concerned with the influence of touch in consumer behaviour outcomes and persuasion. The second domain studies compensation due to an inability to touch and the third domain investigates the origin and causes of variation in Need-For-Touch (NFT) levels.

Previous consumer research suggests a significant correlation between consumer innovativeness and opinion leadership stressing on the associations between consumer characteristics, preferences, motivations and personality traits in one area (opinion leading) to another (consumer knowledge) (Workman & Cho, 2013). In addition, research findings suggest similarities between NFT and psychological variables in terms of consumer motives and traits (Spence et al. 2014).

Nevertheless, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there were no studies examining the relationships between NFT and these variables in the context of the Middle East region, particularly, in Saudi Arabia. This research aims to investigate the relationship between NFT and psychological variables, including consumer innovativeness, opinion leadership, consumer product-class knowledge and involvement with the product. The findings of this exploratory study will contribute significantly towards understanding consumer behaviour in the region, enabling an accurate anticipation of consumer expectations and thus satisfying their inherent needs. In addition, this study could be used as a guide for marketing managers to develop effective marketing strategies and product development.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Need-For-Touch

The literature review suggests a general debate on whether touching products is a personality trait that can be measured through self-report attitude measures, or a behaviour that changes according to situations and variables in the purchase environment (Peck and Childers, 2003; Peck and Johnson, 2011). In this vein, this research suggests that, whereas variables in the environment affect the NFT, the personality trait in parallel plays an equal role. This suggests that consumers with high NFT have a higher ability to extract and record the tactile information of products, thus enabling them not to touch a product with visual information or a return policy, resulting in lower importance for touching a product. This leads to hypothesis H1.

H1: Consumers who have high (low) Need-For-Touch will score low (high) in importance to touch.

2.2 Innovativeness

Hirschman (1980) defined consumer innovativeness as "an internal drive or motivating force the individual is activating to seek out novel information", signifying an inherent novelty-seeking as an intrinsic force that motivates consumers to pursue new products. The research in the area of innovativeness is diverse. Van et al. (2011) analysed the relationship between consumer innovativeness and the propensity for some consumers to purchase new products more frequently than others. This suggest that the life of new products is activated and introduced to consumer markets via innovative consumers (Kaushik & Rahman, 2014). Linking this argument with the research direction on the motivations to touch advocated by Krishna (2009), elucidates the approach of how this study would contribute to the research on consumer sensory systems. This argument leads to the second hypothesis H2:

H2: Consumers who have high (low) Need-For-Touch will score low (high) in product innovativeness.

2.3 Opinion Leadership

The contribution of word of mouth to marketing communications, consumer decision models and marketing strategy, was followed by the development of the opinion leadership concept. Opinion leaders have been conceptualised as "informal leaders" who repeatedly have a notable impact on other consumers' behaviours and attitudes (Cho & Workman, 2011). Previous studies have shown that consumers who are high and low in opinion leadership behave differently in terms of experiential shopping. For example, Cho and Workman (2011) reported that consumers who are high in opinion leadership have a preference to shop from touch channels and they were found to be more engaged in experiential shopping, which leads them to be the first buyers of new products, often impulsively. Similarly, Peck and Childers (2003) reported that consumers who are high in NFT, compared to those who are low, are motivated via a need for pleasure and sensory satisfaction, and scored higher in impulsive buying. Given these similarities in research findings, this suggests that opinion leadership will be significantly correlated with consumer NFT. This leads to the third hypotheses (H3a & H3b) as follows:

$H3_a$: Opinion leaders will have a high Need-For-Touch.
$H3_b$: Opinion seekers will have a low Need-For-Touch.

2.4 Consumer Product-Class Knowledge

A considerable amount of consumer research has laid emphasis on exploring consumers' prior knowledge or familiarity with products, as consumers are expected to have preceding

experience and information about desired products (Bretschneider & Zogaj, 2016). Consumers gain knowledge about products from different marketing communication sources and build expectations accordingly, guided to a confirmation bias through direct experience. It is generally observed that novice consumers are not capable or unwilling to perform cognitive computations on product information (Siminelli, 2017). Accordingly, consumers who represent this segment may prefer to explore products physically rather than collecting different pieces of information, which requires higher cognitive effort. This may answer why some consumer groups have high NFT. This leads to the fourth hypothesis ($H4_{a\&b}$) of this research, where NFT is the dependent variable:

$H4_a$: Expert/knowledgeable consumers within a product-class will have low Need-For-Touch.

$H4_b$: Novice consumers within a product-class will have high Need-For-Touch.

3.0 Research Methodology

Due to the explanatory nature of the study, this research adopts an epistemology philosophy which is suitable to answering the "questions of the relationship between the 'who' and the 'what' (Corbetta, 2003). Since the research involved hypothesis testing based on quantitative and qualitative data, a deductive approach is applied as the research approach.

3.1 Product Pre-tests – Pilot Study

During the pilot study, a sample population of 50 participants was shown photographs of products including laptops, cameras, mobile phones, keyboards, mouses, sunglasses, couches, beds, chairs, tissues, soaps and watches. First, the products were pre-tested to determine the level of product innovativeness (newness), using a four- dimensions scale to measure whether the product is genuinely new or marginally new. The level of innovativeness is decided by respondents in terms of four dimensions, which are: "packaging, physical appearance, user preparation or user behaviour, and technological processing". Second, the products were tested to determine the product's sensory diagnostics. The results confirmed the validity of the proposed approach.

3.2 Participants and Instrument

The participants of the survey represent a sample population from a diverse demographic of Saudi Arabia. Among 108 participants, 59.3 percent were men, while 40.7 per cents were females. A total of 26 questions were developed to measure NFT, opinion leadership, touch, vision, innovation and knowledge. The questionnaire is tested for content validity by consulting with experts and the academics in the field. The questionnaire was distributed via online, across the sample population of 600 participants, who were selected using convenience sampling. In

order to increase the response rate, a reminder was sent to the participants after two weeks. This yielded a total of 216 responses, with the response rate being 36 percent.

4.0 Results

Data were analysed using SPSS to test and measure the relationship proposed in the study. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to measure the reliability of the scales. The alpha coefficient of the measure of the construct was 0.70 as suggested by Cronbach (1951), indicating all the measures had above average acceptable internal reliability. Next, the responses were analysed to measure the variation in data.

As illustrated in table 1, the results show that NFT varies between 20 - 96 weight points, with a relatively higher NFT (67 points) followed by 58 weight points, representing 15.7 percent of the sample population. The different relationships between all the variables are investigated using the Pearson correlation coefficient in two steps (see table 2). In the first step, NFT is strongly correlated to OL (r = 0.491), whereas there is a small relationship between OL and vision (r = .032). As presented in table 6, touch is positively correlated with innovation (r = 0.377), whilst product innovation and knowledge are strongly positively correlated (r = 0.573). Results also depict that touch and vision are positively correlated (r = 0.203), while NFT is positively correlated with touch, vision and knowledge (r = 0.242, r = 0.287 and r = 0.222 respectively).

Table 1: Weight of variables

	Weight	Frequency	Percent
NFT (highest)			
1	67	9	8.3
2	58	8	7.4
Opinion Leadership			
1	60	25	23.1
2	64	17	30
Vision			
1	80	30	27.8
2	60	22	20.4
Touch			
1	80	31	28.7
2	100	27	25
Innovation			
1	80	19	17.6
2	60	16	14.8
Knowledge			
1	80	16	14.8
2	65	13	12

5.0 Discussion

The findings of this research support the behavioural perspective of consumer psychology. Previous research has debated whether touch can be characterised as a personality trait (influenced by levels of NFT) that influences the behaviour or as a behaviour irrespective of personality profiling; in other words, does attitude predict behaviour? This study supports the argument that touch can be characterised as a personality trait that is important to consider when predicting consumer behaviour. That is, one of the research findings suggests that consumers who have high NFT score low in importance to touch. Consistent with Peck and Childers (2003), consumers who have high NFT are expected to be more willing to purchase a product, even if they were unable to touch it, due to their higher mental accessibility and capacity to store and recall tactile information of products. Conversely, consumers who have low NFT are more eager to evaluate and make purchase decisions based on touching products. This means that NFT personality profile (high or low) plays a role in the actual behaviour of evaluating and judging a product by touching.

Table 2: Comparison of the correlation coefficient between male and female

Correlations

		NFT	OL	Vision	Touch	Innovation	Knowledge
NFT	Pearson Correlation	**1**	**.441****	**-.012**	**.125**	**.237**	**.213**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		**.000**	**.922**	**.326**	**.059**	**.092**
OL	Pearson Correlation	**.550****	**1**	**.020**	**.040**	**.002**	**.168**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	**.000**		**.876**	**.753**	**.986**	**.184**
Vision	Pearson Correlation	**.126**	**.044**	**1**	**.159**	**.019**	**.074**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	**.416**	**.775**		**.208**	**.882**	**.561**
Touch	Pearson Correlation	**.382***	**.395****	**.249**	**1**	**.206**	**.020**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	**.010**	**.008**	**.103**		**.102**	**.878**
Innovation	Pearson Correlation	**.350***	**.399****	**.376***	**.571****	**1**	**.522****
	Sig. (2-tailed)	**.020**	**.007**	**.012**	**.000**		**.000**
Knowledge	Pearson Correlation	**.241**	**.298***	**.337***	**.323***	**.636****	**1**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	**.115**	**.050**	**.025**	**.033**	**.000**	

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Female Male

The major contribution of this research is towards marketing practices. This will assist online retailers or other non-touch marketing industries in improving their products' visual information, which stimuli consumers will find the meaningful and thus touch will be a secondary variable. Finally, the potential managerial contribution of this research might be of interest to different marketing industries, given the linkage approach of this research between different research areas. In particular, online retailers can benefit from the compensation mechanism developed by this research, to understand how and which touch-diagnostic products (continuous innovation versus discontinuous) can be communicated visually. Online

retailers or any other non-touch marketing industry can improve their products' visual information to the extent that consumers will find the stimuli meaningful and thus touch will be a secondary variable.

6.0 Conclusion

The main aim of this study is to examine the role of product innovativeness, opinion leadership and consumer product-class knowledge in understanding consumers' Need-For-Touch. In order to achieve that, a survey was conducted using a convenience sample of 128 males and 88 females, representing different areas in Saudi Arabia. The findings reveal that the consumer's level of NFT does relate to their level of familiarity with products. The outcomes of this exploratory study will contribute significantly towards understanding consumer behaviour in the region, enabling an accurate anticipation of consumer expectations and thus satisfying their inherent needs. The findings of this research are intended to contribute to the consumer behaviour research community, especially pre-choice aspects of consumer behaviour, attitudes and consumer psychological market segmentation.

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