



Mental Imagery in an In-store Apparel Shopping Context: Do Women and Men Differ?

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Introduction and Conceptual Development

As a mental recreation of experiences, mental imagery creates sensory experiences in people's minds (Kosslyn, Ganis and Thompson, 2001). Empirical research in various contexts has supported the significant role of mental imagery in influencing consumer behavior. In a print ad context, Miller and Stoica (2003) compared the photographs and artistic renditions of a vacation destination and found that the photograph was more effective not only in evoking greater mental imagery, but also eliciting favorable attitudes toward the ad and brand and patronage intention. In online apparel shopping, Overmars and Poels (2015) demonstrated that dynamic product representations using a mix-and-match technology was more effective in eliciting mental imagery than static representation with rigid pictures. They further found that mental imagery evoked by dynamic product representations enhanced experiential values and ultimately re-patronage intention. Yoo and Kim (2014) demonstrated that concrete consumption backgrounds used for online product presentation were more effective in eliciting mental imagery than the commonly used solid background.

Despite the significant role mental imagery plays in consumer decision-making, mental imagery has been largely overlooked in the context of in-store shopping, whereas there has been a strong emphasis on actual sensory experiences in stores. While supporting the importance of actual sensory experiences in stores, we argue that mental imagery perhaps plays a complementary role in influencing consumer experiences in the context of in-store shopping. Research evidence suggests that actual sensory experience can further evoke mental imagery (Tucker & Ellis, 1998). Perhaps various sensory experiences evoked by store atmospherics could facilitate mental imagery in stores. Nonetheless, little has been known about mental imagery in the context of in-store shopping. One recent study found that both sensory experiences and mental imagery influence the consumer decision-making process through different underlying mechanisms (Park et al., 2017). Furthermore, the recent expansion of retail technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality suggest that mental imagery could play a much greater role in consumer experiences in the context of in-store shopping. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of mental imagery in influencing consumers' in-store shopping experiences, with gender as a moderating variable. By drawing on the conceptual framework of sensory marketing by Krishna (2012), this study posited that mental imagery experienced during in-store shopping influences consumers' affective (anticipatory emotion) and cognitive (perceived ownership and decision satisfaction) responses, which subsequently influence conative response (behavioral intentions).

Method and Results

An online survey was conducted by a professional online research firm in South Korea.

Shoppers who had purchased apparel from physical stores within the last six months were eligible for the study. A series of screening questions as well as priming questions were included at the beginning of the survey to carefully select shoppers with extensive in-store shopping experiences. All scale items came from the research literature and had appropriate reliabilities. Demographic information was also gathered.

A total of 455 women (51%) and men (49%) qualified for the study and completed the online survey questionnaire. The respondents were adults between the ages of 20 and 50. Over 80% of the respondents had a post-high school education. To test construct reliability and validity of the measures, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted. The model fit the data well (RMSEA = .066, CFI = .96, IFI = .96). All factor loadings were above .70. The average variance extracted for each construct was above .50 except for mental imagery (= .49), and all composite reliabilities exceeded the cut-off value of .70. In support of discriminant validity, the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded its correlation with another construct. The reliabilities of all the measures were greater than .70.

To investigate the role of mental imagery in influencing consumer responses in an in-store shopping context, a path analysis was conducted. The model fit the data well (RMSEA = .00, SRMR = .002, CFI = 1.00, NFI = 1.00). All proposed relationships were statistically significant except for the relationship between perceived ownership and behavioral intentions (see Figure 1). A multi-group path analysis was run to test for gender differences in how mental imagery influences consumer responses. Across gender, both the fully constrained model and the unconstrained model fit the data well. Furthermore, the fully constrained model was significantly different from the unconstrained model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 23.95$, $\Delta df = 9$, $p < .01$). Women and men differed in how mental imagery influenced consumers' cognitive responses (perceived ownership and decision satisfaction). See Figure 1.

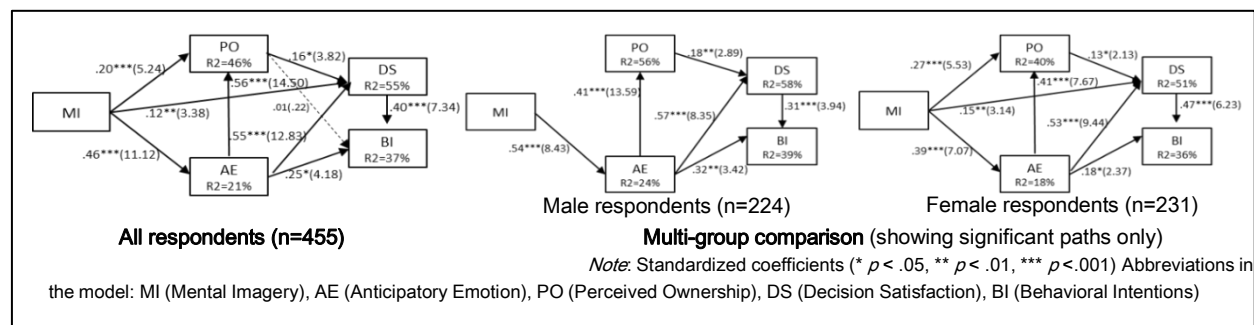


Figure 1. Path diagram for all respondents and multi-group comparison

Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study showed that the way mental imagery influences in-store shoppers differed between women and men in some areas. Whereas mental imagery evoked anticipatory emotions for both women and men, mental imagery increased perceived ownership and decision satisfaction only for women, but not for men. How consumers' affective, cognitive and conative responses were related did not differ between women and men. This study provides theoretical and practical implications to both academicians and practitioners by demonstrating

the underlying paths by which mental imagery influences consumers' in-store experiences. This is one of the few empirical studies that examined the moderating effect of gender in the relationship between mental imagery and consumer behavior. The findings suggest that managers need to develop different in-store customer service strategies for women and men to effectively facilitate mental imagery and lead to positive shopping outcomes. Future research should look into qualitative accounts of mental imagery experienced by women and men.

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