

The influence of sensory marketing on the consumer buying process for online furniture

Damia Nisar
Md. Shahnawaz Abidin
Vardah Saghir
Mansoor Ahmad

Department of Management, Jamia Hamdard University, Delhi, India

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Abstract

As e-commerce continues to grow, the online furniture market faces a significant challenge: customers can't physically touch or feel the products before buying them. This lack of sensory interaction makes it harder for consumers to evaluate furniture – an item where texture, appearance, and physical feel are traditionally key to the decision-making process. In response to this gap, sensory marketing has emerged as a powerful strategy to digitally recreate these sensory experiences and influence consumer behaviour online.

This study explores how sensory marketing affects the consumer buying process in the online furniture industry. It focuses on how digital sensory cues – like visuals, sounds, and imagined touch – can shape consumer perceptions, reduce uncertainty, and boost purchase intentions when physical contact with the product isn't possible.

Through an in-depth review of existing literature, the research identifies ten key factors that consistently appear in studies on sensory marketing and online shopping behaviours: **trust, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, enjoyment, purchase intention, haptic imagery, product informativeness, attitude, auditory stimulation, and enhanced visual experience**. These factors formed the basis for a structured questionnaire designed to collect data from online furniture shoppers.

The study is driven by four main objectives: (1) to examine how sensory marketing influences each stage of the consumer decision-making journey; (2) to pinpoint the most effective sensory cues in online furniture shopping; (3) to understand how these cues help reduce perceived risk and build consumer trust; and (4) to explore how digital platforms can simulate physical experiences to make up for the absence of touch. Ultimately, this research aims to offer practical insights into how sensory marketing can enrich the online shopping experience and help furniture retailers better connect with their customers.

Introduction:

Online shopping has revolutionized consumer purchasing behaviour, driven by advances in internet technology, widespread smartphone use, and evolving lifestyles. Its convenience, extensive product variety, and personalized experiences – especially accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic – have made online retail increasingly dominant. However, challenges remain, such as concerns over trust, security, and the inability to physically examine products before purchase. To better understand these dynamics, researchers employ theoretical models like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), and Technology Continuance Theory (TCT), which emphasize factors such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, trust, social influence, and customer satisfaction.

One critical factor influencing online purchase behaviour is trust, which helps consumers overcome fears of fraud and uncertainty. Other important considerations include perceived risks, convenience, price comparisons, and access to detailed product information. Digital innovations like artificial intelligence enable personalized recommendations, while augmented reality tools simulate product experiences, particularly benefiting sectors like furniture retail, where tactile evaluation is traditionally vital. Additionally, loyalty programs, mobile commerce, social commerce, ethical consumption trends, and voice

assistants are reshaping the online shopping landscape, enriching consumer engagement and decision-making.

Sensory marketing – the strategic engagement of the five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell) to shape perception and influence consumer behaviour – has long been a powerful branding tool with roots in ancient cultures. While sensory marketing is well-established in physical retail environments, its application online poses unique challenges due to the absence of direct tactile and olfactory experiences. Consequently, online retailers rely heavily on high-quality visuals and videos to evoke emotional connections, build trust, and compensate for sensory limitations. Though research on digital sensory marketing is still developing, existing studies suggest that thoughtfully designed sensory cues can positively impact consumer perceptions and confidence, even when physical interaction is not possible. For example, when purchasing products like milk or fresh fruit online – where taste and smell are inaccessible – consumers depend heavily on visual appeal, brand reputation, and user reviews.

This study focuses on the intersection of sensory marketing and online consumer behaviour within the furniture market, a sector where sensory experience traditionally influences purchase decisions. The research aims to: (1) evaluate the influence of sensory marketing across different stages of the consumer decision-making process in online furniture shopping; (2) identify which sensory cues most significantly impact consumer choices; (3) assess how sensory marketing can mitigate perceived risks and build trust in the absence of physical product interaction; and (4) explore how digital platforms can effectively simulate sensory experiences to overcome the lack of tactile feedback. By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to bridge gaps in existing literature and offer insights that help businesses enhance digital shopping experiences through effective sensory marketing strategies.

Methods

The researchers have followed a specific procedure in this study to achieve the objective.

Research Objectives

After a thorough review of existing literature on sensory marketing and online furniture, the researchers identified a significant research gap. This gap has led to the formulation of the following research questions and objectives, respectively, to guide further investigation:

1. How does sensory marketing impact the consumer decision-making process in the online furniture market?
2. What specific sensory cues are most effective in influencing consumer buying decisions when purchasing furniture online?
3. How does the inability to physically feel the product in online furniture shopping impact consumer trust and purchasing decisions?
4. In what ways do online furniture retailers compensate for the lack of tactile feedback to communicate product quality?

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the influence of sensory marketing on different stages of the consumer decision-making process in the online furniture market.
2. To identify the sensory cues that have the greatest impact on consumer decision-making when purchasing furniture online.
3. To assess the role of sensory marketing in mitigating perceived risk and building trust in online furniture shopping.
4. To investigate how digital platforms can use sensory marketing techniques to simulate physical sensory experiences to compensate for the lack of tactile feedback.

This study aims to develop a conceptual framework that identifies the key factors in sensory marketing and online furniture.

Search Strategy

- Databases Used: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ResearchGate
- Keywords: Sensory Marketing, Consumer Decision Making, Online Furniture, Consumer Buying Process

- Papers Included: Recent studies from the last 5–10 years, theoretical papers, Empirical studies, peer-reviewed journal articles,
- Excluded: government reports, conference proceedings, book chapters, abstracts, editorials, theses, and duplicate records. The review also omitted studies focused solely on offline environments or unrelated sectors, such as automotive or food and beverage, unless those studies offered meaningful insights into online sensory experiences relevant to the furniture industry

Literature Review

Introduction to Sensory Marketing

For many years, marketers have encouraged consumers to visualize the use of their products. According to Krishna (2010), sensory marketing is defined as 'marketing that engages the consumers' senses and influences their behaviour's.' This definition can be expanded to suggest that sensory marketing encompasses 'marketing that engages the consumers' senses and influences their perception, judgment, and behaviour' (2018). Marketers and advertisers have employed Sensory Marketing (SM) due to its significant impact on Consumer Behaviour. The senses have been referenced in ancient texts and scriptures across various cultures, civilizations, and religions, with detailed discussions of the five senses, known as the indriyas or sense organs, in Hindu scriptures (Mamidi & Gupta, 2018). Buddhism also emphasizes the importance of the five senses, referred to as *dbang po* (Holba, 2019). From the ancient Greek civilization (Jennifer, 2017) to the Maya civilization, the senses have been extensively documented in their texts as a means of communication with the external world (Houston & Taube, 2000). Marx's writings introduce the concept of the 'Human Sense,' which integrates all five senses, highlighting the multisensory aspect (Mamidi & Gupta, 2018). The domain of sensory marketing has garnered significant attention from researchers, resulting in a notable increase in publications in this area over recent years. Consequently, there is a growing interest from both the marketing and academic communities in sensory marketing. Nevertheless, the field of sensory marketing is extensive and diverse, encompassing studies that focus on the senses and their integration (Krishna, 2012a), the application of sensory marketing in advertising (Krishna et al., 2016), the influence of one sense on another (Krishna & Morrin, 2008), their interactions (Krishna, 2006), and their effects on consumer behaviour (Helmefalk, 2019; Balaji et al., 2011), among other topics. Sensory marketing is a rapidly developing yet fragmented field, posing challenges for researchers seeking a cohesive and objective overview.

Key Elements of Sensory Marketing

The five senses – sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell – play distinct yet interconnected roles in shaping consumer experiences. Scholars have extensively studied each sensory dimension, often highlighting how a multi-sensory approach generates greater emotional responses and deeper brand relationships (Krishna, 2012; Hultén, 2015).

✓ **Sight:** Visual elements are perhaps the most heavily utilized in marketing, given the dominance of vision in human perception. Colors, shapes, and design significantly influence brand recognition, product evaluation, and mood (Labrecque et al., 2013).

✓ **Color Psychology:** Different colors evoke different emotional reactions; for instance, red can stimulate appetite while blue conveys trust and calmness (Labrecque & Milne, 2012).

Packaging and Store Design: Visual aesthetics can enhance perceived product quality and brand image (Spence et al., 2014).

✓ **Sound:** Sound includes music, brand jingles, and ambient noise. Research shows that background music tempo and genre can influence shopping pace and product preferences (Biswas et al., 2019).

Background Music: Slow music leads to longer shopping times and higher spending (Milliman, 1982; recent updates by Garlin & Owen, 2016).

✓ **Sonic Branding:** Unique auditory logos (e.g., McDonald's "I'm Lovin' It") reinforce brand identity (Krishna, 2012).

✓ **Smell:** Olfactory stimuli are powerful triggers of emotion and memory. Pleasant scents can create positive evaluations of retail environments and even enhance the perceived value of products (Krishna et al., 2016).

✓ **Ambient Scent:** Subtle use of scent in stores has been linked to increased dwell time and sales (Spence et al., 2014).

✓ **Taste:** Taste is particularly significant in the food and beverage sector but increasingly leveraged across other domains through product sampling and experiential marketing (Krishna, 2012).

✓ **Food Sampling:** Experiential marketing strategies use taste to build emotional connections (Hultén, 2015).

✓ **Touch:** Tactile sensations significantly impact product perceptions, especially regarding quality and value.

✓ **Haptic Imagery:** Even in online contexts, encouraging consumers to imagine touch can enhance product attractiveness (Peck & Childers, 2018).

Consumer Buying Process:

Consumer behavior encompasses the thoughts, emotions, and actions individuals experience during the consumption process (Peter & Olson, 1987). In the realm of online shopping, consumers have the ability to select from a vast array of products that can be customized according to various criteria, ranging from sneakers to computers. This behavior is shaped by underlying values, motives, and attitudes, which are reflected in purchasing decisions. Shopping motivations can be categorized as either hedonic or utilitarian, with both types of values receiving significant attention in research (Kesari & Atulkar, 2016). The swift evolution of e-commerce has revolutionized consumer interactions with products, particularly in sectors where sensory experiences have historically been vital, such as furniture retail (Petit, Velasco, & Spence, 2019). Sensory marketing, which aims to sway consumer perceptions and actions through sensory engagement, has emerged as a crucial tactic for online furniture retailers striving to mitigate the challenges posed by the digital landscape (Kothari & Sharma, 2024). This literature review examines the consumer purchasing process, contrasts the dynamics of online and offline shopping, analyzes the impact of sensory marketing at each stage, and identifies key factors influenced by sensory strategies, drawing on recent academic research from 2015 to 2025.

Consumer Buying Process: Concept and Stages

The consumer buying process typically involves five stages: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

- **Problem Recognition:** The realization of a gap between a desired and actual state, often triggered by internal stimuli (e.g., needs) or external stimuli (e.g., marketing campaigns).

- **Information Search:** Consumers seek internal (memory) and external (online reviews, advertisements) information to resolve their needs.

- **Evaluation of Alternatives:** Consumers assess different products/brands based on attributes like price, quality, or brand reputation (Jain & Chaudhary, 2024).

- **Purchase Decision:** After evaluating, consumers select the most suitable option.

- **Post-Purchase Behavior:** Consumers reflect on their decision, leading to satisfaction (positive reinforcement) or dissatisfaction (leading to cognitive dissonance).

Recent studies emphasize that online environments complicate the buying process, especially in furniture retail, where consumers traditionally rely heavily on haptic (touch) and spatial perception (Petit et al., 2019).

Consumer Buying Process: Online vs. Offline Context

The way consumers make buying decisions—from realizing they need something to actually purchasing it and reflecting afterward—can look very different depending on whether they're shopping online or in a physical store. When we look at this through the lens of sensory marketing, these differences become even more noticeable.

In a traditional offline setting, shopping is a fully sensory experience. You can touch and feel the texture of a sofa, smell the fresh scent of new wood, see how colors look under store lighting, and even hear the ambient music that sets the mood. These sensory elements play a big role in making the experience enjoyable and help customers feel more confident in their choices. This is especially important in industries like furniture, where the “feel” of the product can heavily influence the final decision.

Online, however, things are different. The experience is mostly limited to what we can see on a screen and read in descriptions. Without the ability to touch or interact with a product physically, many consumers feel unsure or hesitant. To overcome this, online retailers are getting creative – using things like high-quality images, 360-degree views, augmented reality, and even sound-based product videos to mimic the in-store experience as closely as possible.

That’s why sensory marketing matters in both settings, but the approach changes depending on where the customer is shopping. Bridging that sensory gap online isn’t just a nice-to-have – it’s essential for building trust, creating a pleasant experience, and ultimately encouraging people to click “buy.”

Sensory Marketing: Online Furniture

Sensory marketing engages consumers' five senses to create immersive brand experiences (Krupka, 2023). For online furniture, the application focuses primarily on visual, auditory, and simulated tactile senses:

- Visual: High-definition photos, 360° rotating images, 3D models, AR visualization (Petit et al., 2019).
- Auditory: Background music in videos that conveys brand identity or emotional tone (Tokinomo, n.d.).
- Simulated Tactile: Descriptive words like "plush," "smooth," or videos showing product usage to hint at touch quality (Onobrakpeya, 2024).

While olfactory and gustatory senses are harder to engage online, sensory marketing compensates through mental imagery stimulation, where vivid descriptions trigger sensory memories (FasterCapital, n.d.)

Influence of Sensory Marketing on Each Stage of the Buying Process

• Problem Recognition

Visual stimuli, such as lifestyle imagery showing furniture in aspirational settings (beautiful living rooms, cozy bedrooms), create emotional triggers, helping consumers recognize latent needs (Agarwal, 2015; Tokinomo, n.d.).

Example: A consumer scrolling Instagram sees an image of a cozy reading nook and realizes the desire for a new armchair.

• Information Search

Detailed product descriptions, video demonstrations, customer reviews focusing on sensory experiences (e.g., "soft fabric," "sturdy feel") serve as crucial informational tools (Berčík et al., 2017).

AR technology, allowing virtual placement of furniture in home spaces, greatly aids information search by reducing uncertainty (Petit et al., 2019).

• Evaluation of Alternatives

Consumers rely heavily on multi-sensory clues when comparing alternatives online. For instance, higher-quality visuals or richer storytelling often translate into perceived product superiority (Krupka, 2023).

Jain and Chaudhary (2024) found that emotional resonance created through sensory cues can outweigh purely rational evaluations like price or specifications.

• Purchase Decision

Sensory engagement builds emotional confidence in the product, reducing hesitation and leading to quicker purchase decisions (Kothari & Sharma, 2024).

According to Onobrakpeya (2024), consumers exposed to multisensory cues reported higher purchase intentions and were more willing to pay premium prices.

- **Post-Purchase Behaviour**

Positive sensory impressions translate into satisfaction, repeat purchases, and brand loyalty (FasterCapital, n.d.). Conversely, if sensory expectations are unmet (e.g., product texture differs from online portrayal), consumers experience cognitive dissonance, leading to negative word-of-mouth (Petit et al., 2019).

Conceptual Framework/Model:

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Originally developed by Davis (1989), the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has been extensively applied to online purchasing contexts. Hossain et al. (2023) demonstrated that perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU) are critical drivers influencing a consumer's intention to shop online.

PU refers to the extent to which a consumer believes that using an online platform will enhance their shopping effectiveness, while PEOU denotes how effortless the shopping experience is perceived to be.

Recent research also integrates trust into TAM, recognizing that online transactions require a high degree of confidence in website security and vendor reliability (Gefen et al., 2017).

Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT and UTAUT2)

Developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003), the UTAUT model combines elements from eight different models, including TAM, TPB, and DOI. UTAUT suggests that performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions impact technology acceptance.

In an e-commerce context, Martins et al. (2019) adapted UTAUT2 to include hedonic motivation (enjoyment derived from online shopping) and price value as critical predictors of online purchase intentions.

Technology Continuance Theory (TCT)

Liao et al. (2009) proposed the Technology Continuance Theory (TCT) to better explain not just initial adoption but the continued use of online services. TCT integrates:

- Attitudes
- Confirmation of expectations
- Satisfaction
- Perceived usefulness

This model is particularly useful for studying repeat purchases in online retail, which are critical for customer retention.

Model Proposed: The STS Model (SOR/TAM Blend)

In this conceptual paper, we propose a hybrid framework combining the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to study the influence of sensory marketing on the online furniture buying process. We refer to this integrated model as the STS Model (Stimulus-Technology-Response) – representing a nuanced approach to understanding consumer behaviour in digital environments.

Theoretical Foundation

SOR Model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974):

- Stimulus (S): External cues from the environment (e.g., sensory stimuli such as visuals, sounds, interactivity).
- Organism (O): Internal states of the consumer (e.g., perception, emotions, cognitive processing).
- Response (R): Behavioural outcomes (e.g., purchase intention, engagement, satisfaction).

TAM Model (Davis, 1989):

- Focuses on the acceptance of technology through two key beliefs:

Perceived Usefulness (PU)

Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)

- These influence attitude toward using the system and ultimately, behavioural intention.

Rationale for STS Integration

In online furniture retail:

- Consumers interact with **digital interfaces** (where TAM applies).
- Their behaviour is also influenced by **sensory elements** (captured via the SOR framework).
- Blending these models helps address both **technological** and **psychological** dimensions of the consumer journey.

STS Model Structure:

1. Stimulus: Product Informativeness, Enhanced Visual Experience, Haptic Imagery, Trust, Auditory Stimulation
2. Organism: Enjoyment, Perceived Ease of Use, Perceived Usefulness
3. Response: Purchase Intention, Attitude

Model Justification

The conceptual framework for this study is based on an integrated approach combining the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), referred to here as the STS Model. This model is designed to explore how sensory marketing influences the online furniture consumer's decision-making process. The chosen variables are theoretically grounded in existing literature and adapted to suit the context of online furniture shopping – a high-involvement, sensory-dependent category.

Stimulus (S): External Sensory and Informational Inputs

These are the marketing-related cues delivered through digital platforms that trigger consumer cognition and affect:

- **Product Informativeness:** The extent to which product details, specifications, and content assist in decision-making. It reduces uncertainty and perceived risk, a key factor in online furniture purchases.
- **Enhanced Visual Experience:** High-resolution images, 360° views, and AR simulations enhance the visual appeal and allow consumers to simulate ownership or placement mentally.
- **Haptic Imagery:** Descriptive language and imagery that evoke the sense of touch – compensating for the inability to interact with the product physically.
- **Trust:** Confidence in the platform, brand, and product representation, which acts as a key sensory and emotional stimulus in e-commerce.
- **Auditory Stimulation:** Video content with voiceovers or ambient sound can improve engagement and enhance the sensory experience.

These stimuli aim to recreate a multisensory retail experience in the online space, stimulating deeper involvement with the product.

Organism (O): Internal Psychological States

These represent the cognitive and affective reactions evoked by the stimuli, which influence behavioural outcomes:

- **Enjoyment:** A hedonic response indicating the emotional pleasure derived from interacting with the online content.
- **Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU):** A TAM construct indicating how effortless the user finds the website or shopping interface.
- **Perceived Usefulness (PU):** Another TAM construct that assesses how well the interface and sensory content assist in making informed purchase decisions.

These internal states mediate the relationship between stimuli and final behaviour, shaping how the consumer interprets and responds to sensory inputs.

Response (R): Behavioural Intentions and Attitude

The final stage captures the consumer's resultant attitudes and intended actions:

- **Purchase Intention:** The likelihood of the consumer completing the furniture purchase based on their internal responses to sensory cues.

- **Attitude:** The overall evaluative judgment toward the product or platform, influenced by both emotional enjoyment and perceived usefulness.

These outcomes are the result of a successful interaction between sensory marketing and the user's psychological processing.

Summary

By combining SOR's environmental psychology focus with TAM's technology acceptance insights, the STS Model offers a robust framework to study how digital sensory cues (stimuli) affect the consumer's internal states (organism), ultimately shaping online buying behaviour (response). It is especially suited to online furniture retail, where tactile and spatial perceptions are critical yet difficult to replicate in virtual environments.

This framework provides both theoretical depth and practical relevance, offering a foundation for future empirical validation.

Quantitative Analysis (Pilot Study)

To support the development of the proposed conceptual framework, a pilot study was conducted involving a sample of 50 participants. The primary aim of this pilot was to assess the clarity, structure, and initial reliability of the questionnaire, as well as to evaluate the feasibility of the research model before proceeding to full-scale data collection.

The questionnaire was structured to measure key constructs derived from the conceptual model, including perceived usefulness, trust, haptic imagery, perceived enjoyment, attitude, product informativeness, auditory stimulation, enhanced visual experience, and purchase intention. All constructs were measured using previously validated Likert-scale items, adapted to suit the online furniture shopping context.

Although a comprehensive statistical analysis is yet to be conducted, the preliminary data collection provided valuable insights. Initial reviews of the responses indicated that participants understood the questions clearly, and no major issues were reported regarding ambiguity or item confusion. This reinforces the appropriateness of the instrument for the target population.

Descriptive statistics and internal reliability will be computed in the next phase to confirm the reliability and consistency of the scales. The pilot study thus serves as a foundational step for refining the instrument and validating the structure of the proposed model, which will be tested through the databases and software's once a larger sample is obtained.

In summary, the pilot study contributes to the conceptual paper by ensuring that the instrument is both methodologically sound and contextually relevant, laying the groundwork for rigorous empirical testing in the subsequent stages of research.

Conclusion and Future Implications

The proposed STS Model introduces a novel interdisciplinary framework that contributes to the theoretical advancement of research in digital consumer behaviour, sensory marketing, and technology acceptance. It offers scholars a new lens to explore how sensory cues influence online purchasing decisions, particularly in sensory-dependent product categories such as furniture, apparel, luxury goods, and home décor. From a practical standpoint, online furniture retailers can leverage these insights to create more immersive and engaging shopping experiences by incorporating technologies like augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), rich visual storytelling, and sensory-rich video content. Such strategies have the potential to build greater consumer trust, enhance engagement, and drive higher conversion rates. Furthermore, as consumers increasingly depend on digital cues in the absence of physical touch, the integration of sensory marketing becomes critical in reducing perceived risk and enhancing post-purchase satisfaction—especially for high-involvement purchases. This paper also lays the groundwork for future empirical research to validate the STS Model using quantitative methods such as structural equation modelling, or experimental designs across diverse demographics and cultural settings. Longitudinal studies could further investigate how digitally simulated sensory experiences influence long-term consumer loyalty and retention in e-commerce. In summary, this study bridges an important gap at the intersection of sensory marketing, consumer psychology, and digital technology. By addressing how the sensory limitations of

online environments can be mitigated through strategic design and innovation, the paper contributes both theoretical insight and practical guidance for researchers and e-retailers alike.

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