

# Sensory Marketing during COVID-19 - Creating a Multisensory Experience for Online Shopping

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*Abstract: The unprecedented shift caused by the Covid-19 pandemic generated a series of changes in consumer preferences and behavior. One of the most significant changes is represented by an increasing interest in online shopping. During the last two years consumers have tried to stay safe by shopping online which has resulted in the drop of physical touchpoints between retailers and consumers. While making online purchases consumers can no longer touch, smell or taste the products, but only rely on perceiving them through sight and hearing. The full sensory experience of shopping in a physical store is now limited to a mobile or computer screen. It is therefore important to understand how the lack of some sensory stimuli can impact consumers' perceptions and behavior. This articles aims to present how marketers can adapt sensory marketing to the digital context and discover new ways of utilizing the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch in order to appeal to consumers. It is important to understand that sensory elements, beyond images and sounds, will benefit customer engagement and that it's useful to integrate new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, in order to develop multisensory experiences that improve consumers experiences.*

*Key-Words: sensory marketing, consumer senses, consumer experience, online shopping, e-commerce, COVID-19.*

*JEL Classification: M31.*

## 1 Introduction

Consumers experience products and services through their five senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch). Experiences are represented by the consumer's reactions and interpretations of the environment through their senses. This means that the way a consumer sees a product, what he hears, how he reacts when he smells, tastes or touches it influences the way he feels, thinks and behaves about that product.

Manufacturers and retailers rely on sensory marketing to generate favorable consumer responses. Sensory marketing is defined as "marketing that engages the consumers' senses and affects their perception, judgment and behavior" (Krishna, 2013). This means that marketers are purposefully exposing consumers to multiple sensory stimuli at various points of contact. At the point of sale these stimuli are typically product-related and ambience-related (Fürst, Pecornika & Binder, 2021). When a consumer makes a purchase in a physical store, it is very likely that the way in which his senses are directly stimulated will generate a favorable attitude towards the products and will result in a purchase decisions. Sensory marketing is traditionally associated with engaging in-store consumers. But what happens when a consumer buys online? During online shopping interactions with the products or the environment are limited to a mobile or computer screen. What impact can sensory marketing have in the online environment?

The online environment has limited capacities in terms of multisensory experiences. In the online environment "the most widely used sensory elements are engaging customers through visuals and auditory notes that create tangibility for products that customers cannot feel or touch" (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5376). This means that while shopping online "consumers often wonder what a particular product would look or feel like or how would a particular fragrance smell" (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5376). This can generate a feeling of uncertainty that induces hesitation in wanting to purchase a product.

According to Smith (2020), during the Covid-19 pandemic "we are undergoing a sensory revolution (...) because the context and environment in which we sense has been profoundly altered". Consumers are increasingly purchasing and consuming online "where, traditionally, the sensory interaction has mostly been

limited to visual, and to a lesser extent, auditory inputs” (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019). Although the restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the new Coronavirus have led to a decrease of direct offline touchpoints, consumers “still wish to self-evaluate products before engaging” in online shopping (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5379).

In this context, integrating different new technologies, such as touch screens, headphones, digital taste/smell interfaces, the internet of things (IoT), artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, social media could help to develop a multisensory experience that improves consumer’s willingness to buy. These evolving technologies “are now key to building more interactive, immersive and informative online shopping experiences” (Griffith, 2020). Since the online environment has limited capacities in terms of multisensory experiences, retailers should start thinking of creating more virtual touchpoints between products and consumers. “Virtual touch points are anything from social media to product advertisements, e-commerce to product catalogs” (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5378). In the online environment sensory experiences should no longer be based on a single sensory stimulation (such as images or sounds), but should start combining senses with the help of new technologies.

Online retailers should create a “webmosphere”, meaning that they should design their online stores taking into consideration all the sensory elements that can have positive effects for online shoppers (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019). Using digital interactive technologies could enable a more complex manipulation of products on the screen and could also help inform the consumer about “other sensory properties of a product (e.g., its texture, smell, and possibly even taste) that are simply not available currently in most (primarily visual) online environments” (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019, 43).

Even though in the online environment consumer’s interactions with the products occur only through digital interfaces, this does not mean that in the online environment the senses stop affecting cognition (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019). When a consumer buys online the interaction with products and services is “largely dependent on decoding a message based on mental image and perception” (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5376).

All the stimuli to which a consumer is exposed in the physical environment are perceived through the five senses and, with the help of different introspective states, some of them are then stored in memory as multisensory representations. Thus consumers create in their minds representations of products and services and are able to associate certain sensations and characteristics with each of them. “The exposure to product pictures in online stores can trigger spontaneous perceptual re-enactments (mental imagery) of those multisensory representations” (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019, 43) meaning that a consumer can remember the appearance, sound, taste, smell or texture of a product. Therefore “through perceptual re-enactments the consumer’s senses might be stimulated online” (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019, 43).

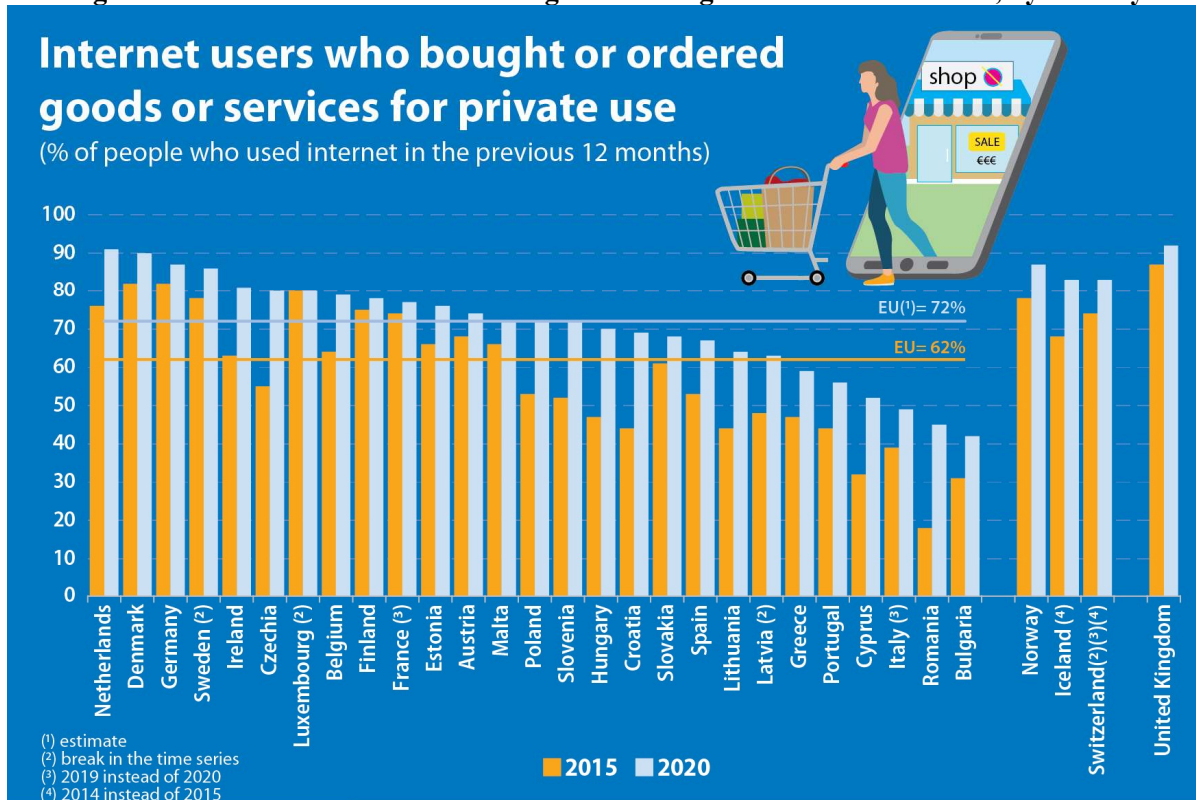
Another important aspect refers to the evaluation that the consumer will make after the product he bought online is delivered to him. It may happen that the purchased items appear different once delivered or not similar to how the customer pictured it in his mind. This can be “due to the limited multisensory interactions present in the online environment, which affects how the customers will evaluate the product” (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5377). Because the purchased items cannot be physically evaluated, it is clear that consumers need a more holistic interaction with products and more information that can help them to form tangible representations in their minds. “A customer needs more than just images and sounds to overcome this mental intangibility. Offline experiences trigger a customer’s impulse buying behavior to a greater extent than online experience due to the free interaction of the multi-senses and the physical store effect” (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5377).

## **2 Creating a Multisensory Experience for Online Shopping**

According to a survey conducted by Eurostat, in 2020, 65% of all adults (aged 16-74 years) in the EU bought/ordered goods or services on the internet (Eurostat, 2021a). Estimates show that “with high street shopping affected by the COVID-19 restrictions and changes in habits and preferences, e-commerce can be expected to grow further” (Eurostat, 2021c).

According to ARMO (Romanian Association of Online Stores) estimates, in 2020 Romania had the fastest growth rate of e-commerce in the EU, even if only 45% of Romanian internet users bought goods or services online. The Romanian e-commerce market reached 5.6 billion Euros and marked an annual growth of 30% compared to 2019 (GPeC, 2021). Although the e-commerce market in Romania is well below the European average (as shown in figure 1), the fact that a significant evolution is observed annually indicates that the market is in a continuous growth.

**Figure 1: EU's internet users who bought/ordered goods or services online, by country**



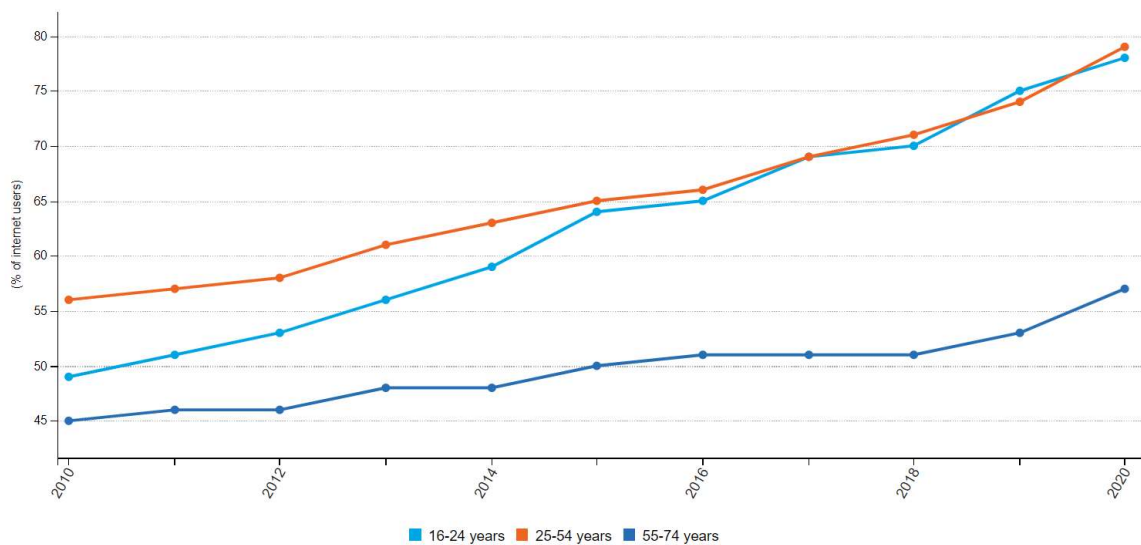
ec.europa.eu/eurostat

Source: Eurostat, 2021c.

According to Eurostat (Eurostat, 2021a), at EU level “younger people, aged 25-34 years were 2.5 times more likely to have made use of the internet to shop (83%) than people aged 65-74 years (33%)”, as shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2: EU's internet users who bought/ordered goods or services online, annual data 2010-2020**

*Internet users who bought or ordered goods or services for private use in the previous 12 months by age group, EU, 2010-2020*



EU estimates for 2020

Source: Eurostat (online data code: isoc\_ec\_buy and isoc\_ec\_ib20)

eurostat

Source: Eurostat, 2021b.

According to the survey (see figure 3), the most popular online purchases were represented by *clothes (including sport clothing), shoes or accessories*, which were ordered by 64% of online shoppers. Wearables were

followed by *films or series as a streaming service or downloads* which were ordered by 32% of online shoppers, *deliveries from restaurants, fast-food chains and catering services*, ordered by 29% of online shoppers, *furniture, home accessories or gardening products*, ordered by 28% of online shoppers, *cosmetics, beauty or wellness products* (27%), *printed books, magazines or newspapers* (27%), *computers, tablets, mobile phones or their accessories* (26%) and *music as a streaming service or downloads*, ordered by 26% of online shoppers (Eurostat, 2021c).

**Figure 3: Most popular online purchases in EU**



ec.europa.eu/eurostat

Source: Eurostat, 2021c.

For some of these product categories, sensory marketing does not play an essential role in influencing the purchasing decision. For other categories, namely clothes, food, care products, personal or home accessories and others, sensory perception is an important factor that can influence the purchase decision. Therefore it is important to know how marketers can adapt sensory marketing to the digital context and discover new ways of utilizing the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch in order to appeal to consumers. It is important to understand that sensory elements, beyond images and sounds, will benefit customer engagement and will have a positive impact on their willingness to buy online certain products or services. When it comes to creating a digital experience, retailers can use varied and evolved forms of technology to integrate each sensory stimuli and to appeal to consumers' senses.

## 2.1 Sight

In the online environment “visual cues are offering the most potent sensory experience” (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5380) and are the most used stimuli to connect with consumers. But because they are so commonly used, it is more difficult to capture consumer attention. Therefore “marketers must go beyond traditional techniques like bold colors, logos, videos, and website design and integrate the latest technologies into their strategies” (Griffith, 2020). The consumer engagement and online interaction can be improved by using “virtual product controls such as virtual try-on, 3D product visualization, and haptics imagery” (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5381). How a consumer interacts with visual content can be facilitated by integrating visual-enabling technologies that can offer “larger views (super close-up; zoom in/out; enlargement), alternate views (e.g., views from 2 to 3 angles), 3D-interactive view (views from every angle as a consumer drags their mouse), and virtual try-ons” (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019, 44) of a product.

Also, augmented reality and virtual reality are becoming more popular because “for the first time, consumers are in full control of the interaction and as active participants, they can reinvent the real-life environment and try various combinations before making a choice to buy” (Griffith, 2020). These new technologies “make shopping online easier and more accessible for consumers, especially when content is personalized to the user’s needs” (Griffith, 2020). The perception and the judgment of the buyer can be significantly influenced in this case because

these new technologies offer a richer user experience, can make the online experience aesthetically pleasing and enjoyable and can help to “build trust between a brand and consumer, which is crucial during the ‘try before you buy’ phase” (Griffith, 2020).

It is also important to emphasize that all these new technologies “can increase the consumer’s ability to generate mental simulations of transformation, rotation, and reorganizations of the imagined product with a positive effect on its evaluation” (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019, 47).

## **2.2 Sound**

Whereas many of the decisions a consumer makes are influenced by the emotions he feels at that moment, and since sounds have the ability to activate emotions, it is important to see if auditory stimuli can be integrated into online shopping in order to improve consumers engagement. “Brands can successfully evoke emotion through sound” therefore marketers should “select music that aligns with their brand messaging” and incorporate it in different touchpoints such as “digital ads, social media videos or embedded music on a website” in order to create a specific atmosphere (Griffith, 2020). In this case, the exposure to auditory stimuli is decided by the consumer, who in the online environment can always turn off the sound or can continue to listen the message of a brand.

## **2.3 Taste and smell**

In the online environment the smell and the taste of a product are hard or even impossible to replicate. That is why retailers must focus on the mental images that a consumer managed to create for a product. In order to reactivate the sensation of taste or smell of a product, retailers must use multisensory stimulation. “Depending on the product, digital marketers can create and display images and use emotive language in a way that stimulates mental images of its texture, smell and even flavor” (Griffith, 2020). Replication of the sensation of taste and smell can be stimulated by visual technologies and sounds (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5382).

## **2.4 Touch**

Although when buying online consumers “normally do interact haptically with multiple interfaces already (e.g., mice and touch screens)” (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019, 49), engaging the sense of touching the products in a digital environment is very difficult. Some consumers feel the need to touch and evaluate the products before they buy them and that's why they are reluctant to shop online. In the online environment consumers can imagine touching products or can mentally simulate the sensation with the help of internet of things (IoT), virtual reality and augmented reality (Griffith, 2020). Depending on the type of product, retailers might use a written description of the haptic properties of the product in order to help consumers evaluate the texture, dimensions and materials of that product (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019). Retailers “should also consider the use of multi-gesture apps and direct touch effects – like pinching and scrunching a material” to create an online multisensory experience (Griffith, 2020). This can prove to have an effect on the decision to buy a certain product since “touch or the mental visualization of touch has a positive effect on consumers and the ownership of a particular product or service” (Kaushik & Gokhale, 2021, p. 5382). This field has a chance to evolve because “recent progress in human-computer interaction suggests that it will soon be possible to imitate the feel of different textures by means of tactile interfaces” (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019, 50).

## **3 Conclusion**

Any retailer, whether selling online or offline, aims to create a unique, positive and memorable experience for its customers. Sensory stimulation plays a key role in creating these positive experiences and “can also non-consciously influence consumer judgments and behaviors, including types of purchases” (Biswas, 2019, p. 111).

In general, sensory marketing deals with creating atmosphere in physical stores. Since the possibility of stimulating consumers’ senses is greatly diminished, online shopping is not a sensory experience. In order to make the right decisions, consumers use their senses to gain necessary information in the shopping process. In the online environment the “sensory deficiencies decrease the perceived value of online offerings and frequently result in product returns and dissatisfaction with the purchase experience” (Heller et al., 2019, p. 219).

But the COVID-19 pandemic has forced companies to rethink their marketing strategies. Since recently there is an increasing interest in online shopping, marketers should develop innovative actions that will help to improve consumers digital sensory experiences. “Marketers must become more innovative in their approach to connecting

with their target audience using real time data and the latest technologies. Central to this is creating multisensory experiences” (Griffith, 2020). This means that marketers should focus on creating an online environment more connected to the senses. New adaptations of sensory marketing strategies in online environments may be possible based on multisensory devices and technologies that are offering the opportunity to stimulate more of the customer’s senses over the Internet (Petit, Velasco & Spence, 2019, 53).

According to Gartner (2020), the strategic technology trends for the future include the development of sensory marketing and Gartner predicts that multisensory experiences will be among the most promising technological trends of the future.

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