**Human model pictures in e-commerce: exploring the effect of self-image on product choice and consumers' purchase intention**

**Abstract:** This research intends to verify the influence of self-image on purchase intention product choice in an online retail setting, by varying the product presentation (with or without a human model using the product). Two experimental studies showed that pictures with a human model using the product yielded greater product choice and purchase intention than pictures without a human model. It was also shown that self-image acts as a mechanism which promotes greater purchase intention. The results of this research highlight the importance of the pictures selected by the company when presenting a product in the e-commerce environment.

**Keywords:** Product presentation. Self-image. Visual cues.

## 1. Introduction

Consumers have strong preferences for products with attractive appearances (Imram, 1999) and the use of different image compositions in products' presentation may provide visual stimuli that drive consumer attitudes. In online retailing it is not possible to have a direct experience with the product (e.g. touch and smell), therefore an effective product presentation becomes one of the main factors that lead to the purchase decision (Yoo & Kim, 2014). In this situation, consumers need to visualize how the product will fit their body, so a mannequin or a human model body may facilitate the simulation of a face-to-face shopping experience (Ha, Kwon, & Lennon, 2007).

Then and DeLong (1999) suggested three main visual aspects for product presentation in the online context: pictures that closely represent the product's final use, pictures that are displayed with similar items, and picture view from various angles (e.g. the front and the back). From this perspective, the literature about product presentation shows that the different product presentation formats influence consumers' responses, willingness to pay, willingness to return to the store and the willingness to spend more money than planned (Jeong, Fiore, Niehm, & Lorenz, 2009).

Product pictures are one of the main factors that affect consumers' judgment in an online purchase. Therefore, it is important to consider that consumers search and prefer products which are congruent with their self-image (Birdwell, 1968; Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy, 1985). According to Dunning (2007), peoples' decisions are motivated by their self-image and, the need to honor and affirm the image they have of themselves. From this perspective, consumers assimilate the image of a product, service or brand to his/her personal image, and how the product can present and corroborate to his/her image (Choi & Rifon, 2012; Lee, Kim, & Yu, 2015). If the information is inconsistent with customers' self-image, this can impact customers' attention, acceptance, and retention (Heath & Scott, 1998).

It is observed that there is a research gap considering self-image in a situation when another person is using a product (i.e. clothes). The main purpose of this study is to verify the influence of self-image on product choice and consumers' purchase intention by varying the product presentation (with or without a human model using the product). We believe that by presenting another person using the product, choice and purchase intention will increase. The picture of a person using the product would bring additional information, showing how to use the product and how it fits in a specific body shape. Thus, we believe that self-image can be a mediator between product presentation and purchase intention.

We structure the present paper as follows. In the next section, we present the theoretical background and hypothesis. Then, the method, the main results and the final conclusions with suggestions for future studies.

## 2. Theoretical Background

In making decisions regarding online purchases, consumers evaluate the alternatives available in two stages: the product choice and the purchase decision. In the first of these, consumers evaluate products in less depth and choose from among the alternatives a set of those that they prefer (Häubl & Trifts, 2000). In this stage, some products are displayed in a product list for consumers to search and choose (Diehl & Zauberman, 2005). In the second stage, consumers conduct an in-depth comparison of the options in this set, resulting in a purchase decision (Häubl & Trifts, 2000). Besides that, in online purchases the consumers' judgment are based on textual descriptions and product pictures (Wang, Li, & Chau, 2016) and certain aspects of the product's presentation may help to reduce uncertainty about the product's performance (Lee, Kim, & Fiore, 2010).

The consumer's sensory approach to a product (such as the visual presentation of the product) is an important factor in the purchasing decision, whereas the way the product is presented may increase the product purchase intention (Park, Lennon, & Stoel, 2005). That happens when brands use a set of elements that bring the consumer closer to the actual use of the product, such as representations nearby of its final use, product display in several angles and two-sided presentation (Then & Delong, 1999). Other features available for product presentation (e.g. products featured on a body shape, zoom in and out, front and back views) are effective in providing sensory and aesthetic information about the product, stimulating the purchase decision (Fiore & Jin, 2003; Park, Lennon, & Stoel, 2005).

Experience with the product may differ according to the context of product presentation due to the level of information available and sensory appeals in the composition of visual stimuli (Jeong, Fiore, Niehm, & Lorenz, 2009). Considering literature about product presentation, Jeong et al. (2009) recognize that complex pictures (e.g. zoomed pictures and pictures with a model in a setting) result in a more vivid shopping experience for consumers. In this context, presenting a product in body shape improves the shopping experience and allows consumers to try the product mentally, fantasizing its use when recognizing the product in a real body (Fiore & Ogle, 2000).

Visual aspects related to the sense and the stimulus of touch still deserve attention, especially in e-commerce, where to feel, touch and try products is an obstacle (Verhagen, Vonkeman, & Van Dolen, 2016). Di, Bhardwaj, Jagadeesh, Piramuthu and Churchill (2014) investigated three common types of product presentation in e-commerce: with a person using the product (Person), with the product being presented on a mannequin (Mannequin) and only the product picture without other elements (Flat). From this perspective, the authors showed that the picture with a person using the product is more attractive compared to the other pictures, while online consumers prefer to see products presented on human models as rather as on mannequins or as flat (Kim, Kim, & Lennon, 2009). Di et al. (2014), identified that humans are naturally attracted by pictures of people. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

**H1 – Pictures with a human model using the product generates (a) greater choice and (b) greater purchase intention than Flat and Mannequin pictures.**

Previous studies show that consumers prefer brands that have images compatible and congruent with their perceptions of self (Zinkham & Hong, 1991). From this perspective, consumers' decisions are influenced by their self-image, who look for products with congruent images that corroborate the image of themselves (Dunning, 2007). The congruence between the image of products and the self-image of consumers affects consumers' product preference and purchase intention (Sirgy, 1985). In this context, self-image congruence stimulates positive

identification with the product and positive evaluations and attitudes in relation to a brand, product, or company (Ericksen, 1996; Sirgy, 1982).

The self-image is valuable and of great importance to individuals, so they direct their behavior to maintain and enhance their self-image (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). Chon (1992) found that when the consumer perceives the congruence between the product and their own self-image, the consumer presents greater satisfaction and greater identification with the product, besides attaining an emotional state of self-esteem and reinforces their self-consistency motives. For example, in a study of self-image and choice of a travel destination, Chon (1992) identified that tourist satisfaction is significantly correlated with consumer self-image and congruence with the image of the destination chosen.

The product image can be built from direct experiences, word-of-mouth or commercial information about the product (Ericksen, 1996). From this perspective, it is possible to infer that visual characteristics in a product's presentation may interfere in how the consumer establishes the product image and how they see themselves using that product. This perception consequently influences the matching between product image and consumers' self-image and more favorable attitudes around the product. For example, a human model using the product provide a more realistic representation of product use, showing how the product fits the human body, and evoking more effective and positive emotional responses (Kim et al., 2009).

According to the literature about self-image, it is observed that consumers have attitudes that are more favorable to a brand perceived as congruent to the individual consumer self-image, whereas they have fewer positive attitudes when the brand image does not approach your self-image (Graeff, 1996). The concept of self-image includes physical characteristics of an individual, but also evaluations and definitions as strength, honesty, humor, sophistication, and others perceived characteristics about themselves (Birdwell, 1968). From this perspective, consumers tend to select products and brands that correspond to their self-concept and self-image to minimize a possible dissonance associated with a purchase. They make a purchase consistent with self-image buying the right products from the right manufacturers at the right stores (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

**H2 – Higher self-image promotes (a) greater choice and (b) greater purchase intention for the picture with a human model using the product compared to the other pictures.**

**H3 – Self-image mediates the effect of product presentation on purchase intention.**

## 3. Study 1

Study 1 investigated consumers' choice when the product picture shows: (1) Flat product and (2) Human model using the product. Considering that pictures showed a human body, we performed data collection with different pictures for men and women, regarding differences on product design for both men and women. In this study, we explored how these pictures may stimulate choice, self-image, and tangibility.

*Design and participants*

A single factor within-subjects experiment considered two different pictures (Human model wearing the T-shirt x Flat T-shirt). This study consisted in 60 participants (55% male, $M_{age}$ = 38.03) recruited on Mechanical Turk ($0.35/each).

*Procedures*

Participants had to inform their sex before starting the questions. Then, the picture of a human model wearing a T-shirt and a Flat T-shirt were presented for each participant according to its respective sex (see Figure 1).

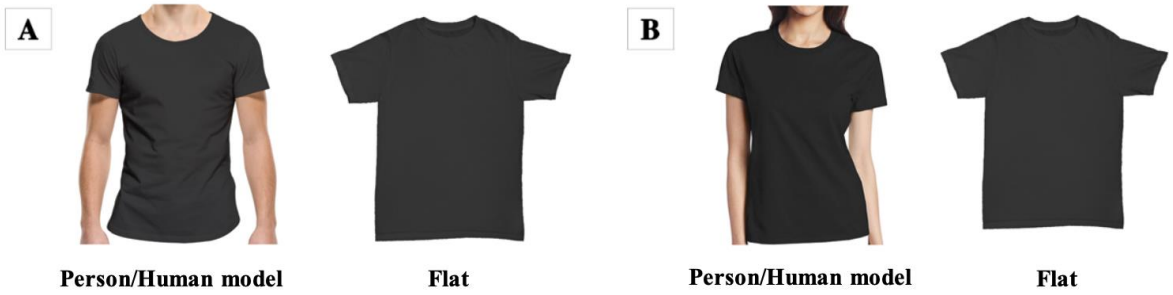



Figure 1 – Pictures manipulated in Study 1

*Measures*

Participants chose one picture and then responded to the self-image scale (Yim, Chan, & Hung, 2007) and the physical intangibility dimension of intangibility scale (Laroche, Bergeron, & Goutaland, 2001) considering their choice. Two manipulation-check questions were considered to check whether participants noticed the color of the T-shirt (i.e., black) and how many different pictures they saw (i.e., two). Demographic information (age, sex and schooling) were also measured.

The collected data in both men and women conditions were pooled and then analyzed.

*Results*

The results showed that 69,7% of the men chose the T-shirt dressed in a human model, while 88,9% of the women chose the T-shirt dressed in a human model ($x^2$ = 3,223; p = 0.73). Besides that, there was no significant difference between pictures to self-image (t (58) = -.059; p = .953) and intangibility (t (58) = -1.183; p = .242). The regression analysis also did not indicate a significant result between self-image and the chosen image (β = .16; t = .059; p = .953).

Considering the hypothesis, consumers have greater choice for products that have pictures with a human model using the product (H1a is supported), but there is no significant difference in the relation between self-image and chosen image (H2a is rejected).

*Discussion*

The results showed that pictures with the presence of a human body were more chosen by consumers. Despite this, none of the measured variables (self-image and intangibility) showed a significant difference between the pictures. We speculate that the self-image and intangibility did not present a significant result because the participants answered the scales after the picture was chosen. From this perspective, the respondents answered the scales affirming and justifying the previous choice.

## 4. Study 2

Study 2 investigated the preferences regarding purchase intention when the product picture shows three types of pictures: (1) Flat; (2) Mannequin; and (3) Human model using the product. We collected the data with different pictures regarding men and women, respecting the different models of t-shirt for both sex. In this study, we explored how these pictures may

stimulate self-image and purchase intention. Furthermore, we tested self-image as a mediator between product presentation and purchase intention.

*Design and participants*

Study 2 was a single factor and between-subjects experiment that manipulated three different pictures considering the most common types of product presentations in e-commerce (Flat x Mannequin x Human model using the product). A total of 108 US-resident respondents (65,7% female; $M_{age}$= 39.1 years) from Figure Eight ($0.25/each) participated in the study.

*Procedures*

Participants were told to imagine that they wanted to buy a basic T-shirt, visited their favorite website, and saw an option. After answering about their sex (female or male), participants were randomly assigned to see the picture of a T-shirt between the three conditions (Figure 2). The picture of the product with a human model (Picture 3: Person/Human model) was presented for each participant according to its respective sex, simmilar to the procedure used in study 1. After pooling the responses: 37 participants saw Picture 1; 37 participants saw Picture 2; and 34 participants saw Picture 3.

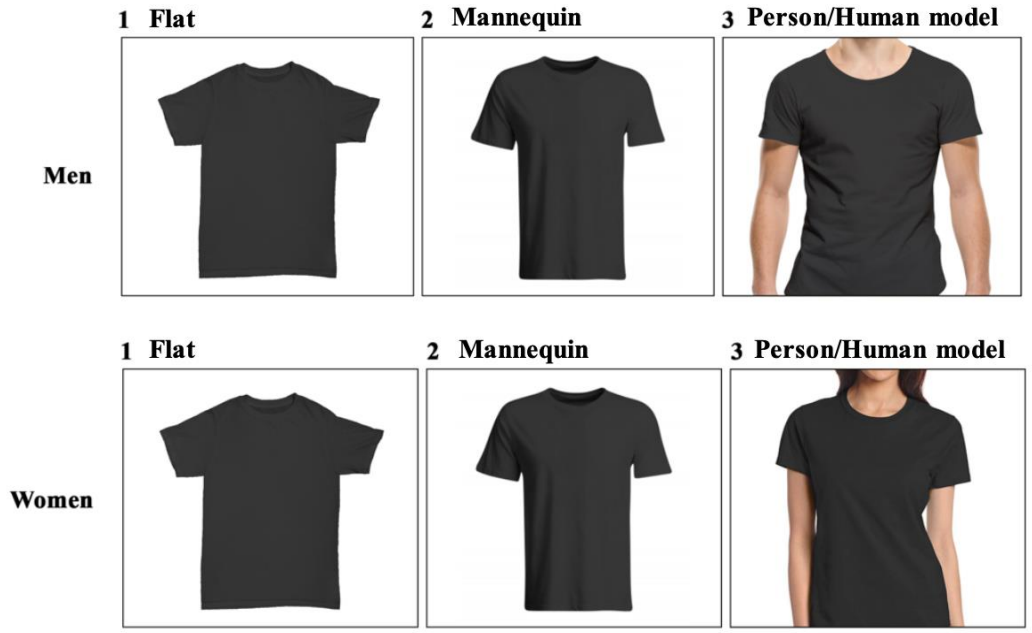



Figure 2 – Pictures manipulated in Study 2

*Measures*

The dependent variable was purchase intention, which was assessed through a 2-item scale adapted from Kwon, Trail and James (2007) (i.e., I would purchase the T-shirt; The probability that I would consider buying the T-shirt is high). Participants showed their level of agreement with the sentences on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "totally disagree" (1) to "totally agree" (7).

In addition, we collected demographic information (age, sex and school level), if consumers liked the T-shirt model (1 = I dislike this T-shirt; 7 = I loved this T-shirt), the realism of the pictures (1 = Unrealistic; 7 = Very realistic), and self-image scale (Yim, Chan, & Hung, 2007). One manipulation-check question was used to check whether participants noted the color

of the T-shirt (i.e., black). The Macro Process of Hayes (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) was used in SPSS for analysis of mediation (Model 4). The data collected for both men and women were pooled and then analyzed.

*Results*

Results showed a significant difference of purchase intention between the conditions ($M_1 = 3.25$; $M_2 = 3.12$; $M_3 = 3.83$) ($F [2,107] = 4.337$; $p < .05$). Analyzing the Tukey post-hoc test, we found a significant difference between pictures 2 and 3 ($p < .05$) and a marginally significant difference between pictures 1 and 3 ($p = .066$) for purchase intention.

Considering the self-image, the ANOVA and post-hoc test of Tukey ($F[2,107] = 5.318$, $p < .05$) showed that there was a significant difference between conditions 1 ($M = 2.84$) and 3 ($M = 3.4$) ($p = .027$) and between pictures 2 ($M = 2.75$) and 3 ($M = 3.4$) ($p = .009$) for the self-image scores.

The analysis of how much consumers liked the T-shirt model ($p = .012$) and the realism of the pictures ($p = .002$) also presented significant results. The results indicate that participants seem to like picture 3 ($M = 5.2$) more than picture 2 ($M = 4.1$) ($p = .012$) and more than picture 1 ($M = 4.35$) ($p = .065$). About realism, picture 2 ($M = 4.72$) was considered the less realistic compared to the pictures 1 ($M = 5.91$) ($p = .002$) and 3 ($M = 5.61$) ($p = .035$).

In summary, the picture 3 with the presence of a person wearing the T-shirt had a higher self-image and higher purchase intention considering the other conditions. Besides that, self-image had a direct and significant effect on purchase intention ($\beta [1,107] = .890$, $t = 11.583$, $p < .001$). H1b and H2b are supported.

To test the self-image mediation between product presentation and purchase intention we used the Macro Process of Hayes (Model 4, 95% CI, 5000 bootstrap samples). We tested the multicategorical option with Indicator coding system for the independent variable. When adding the mediator, we found that the direct effect of product presentation on purchase intention was not statistically significant ($F [108] = .3425$; $p > .05$). However, there were significant relative indirect effects when testing across conditions, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Indirect effects of product presentation on purchase intention through self-image

| Conditions | Effect | BootSE | LLCI | ULCI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 x 1 | -.0764 | .2018 | -.4827 | .3025 |
| 3 x 2 | -.5636 | .1851 | -.9402 | -.2188 |
| 3 x 1 | -.4872 | .1707 | -.8300 | -.1553 |

These results showed that there were only significant mediation effects when comparing across picture with a human model using the product (Picture 3) and pictures without a human model using the product (Picture 1 and 2). The mediation does not happen between Conditions 1 and 2 (-.4827 to .3025), when we compare pictures Flat (Picture 1) and Mannequin (Picture 2). From this perspective, H3 is supported.

*Discussion*

Study 2 showed an interesting sign regarding consumers' purchase intention. As observed on choice (Study 1), consumers have a greater purchase intention for the image that has a human body using the product. We found that consumers have a higher self-image for the picture with the presence of the human body, while higher self-image shows greater product purchase intention.

In addition, the results showed that self-image mediates the relationship between product presentation and purchase intention. Here, the self-image explains why the consumer has a greater purchase intention for a product shown in a specific picture.

We summarized these results in Table 2, showing the expected effect of our hypothesis and the final results of this study.

Table 2 – Summary of hypothesis and results

| **Hypothesis** | | **Effect** | **Result** | **Findings** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H1 | H1a | Direct | Supported | Consumers have greater **choice** for products that have pictures with a human model using the product. |
| | H1b | Direct | Supported | Consumers have greater **purchase intention** for products that have pictures with a human model using the product. |
| H2 | H2a | Direct (+) | Rejected | Higher self-image does not promote greater **choice**. |
| | H2b | Direct (+) | Supported | Higher self-image promotes greater **purchase intention**. |
| H3 | | Mediation | Supported | Self-image mediates the relation between product presentation and **purchase intention** when the picture presents a human model using the product. |

## 5. Conclusions

One of our objectives was to verify the influence of product presentation (e.g. pictures representing the use of a product) on product choice and consumers' purchase intention. From that perspective, we find significant differences of choice and purchase intention between the pictures that presented a human model using the product and the product per se. We also found that self-image mediates the relation between product presentation and purchase intention. The mediation shows that when there is a human model using the product, the levels of purchase intention were higher than the other conditions of product presentation because of a higher level of self-image.

The results are in line with theories that postulate that human models evoke more effective emotional responses (Kim et al., 2009), and also that consumers with a higher self-image towards the product will have more positive responses towards that product (Graeff, 1996). These positive and emotional responses must play an important role on people choice and purchase intention. So, we consider that this study has collaborated with the literature about product presentation and self-image regarding shopping products online.

We believe that marketers must consider these details when offering their products in their online platforms. It is already known that product presentation is crucial to the success of the product on their target market. Therefore, in order to promote more choices and increase purchase intentions of their leads and actual customers, it is worth to consider human models on their product presentation pages, especially when selling apparel.

Considering the difference on choice and purchase intention between conditions with pictures without a person (Flat or Mannequin) and the picture with a human model using the product, we suggest investigate this context in future studies. New studies can explore what details in a picture can increase self-image and what elements a picture needs to facilitate the consumer's identification with the product. This subject needs to be deeply explored to bring evidence to the surface to help managers to create offers that generate greater self-image, self-congruity and, consequently, greater purchase intention. About choice, the study showed that a picture with a human model using the product increases choice, but is necessary to explore why the self-image do not present a significant difference between conditions, as found in purchase intention study.

Despite the findings, new studies are necessary to identify other cues that stimulate self-image and self-congruity, the congruence between self-image and product image. Different body shapes and personal characteristics would be a means to explore this. Therefore, we suggest that future studies consider some dimensions as self-esteem and self-consistency, both as the actual self and the ideal self. We believe that some details on the body shape of the model can stimulate identification and consumer attitudes according to the realistic (how the consumer sees himself) or projected way (how the consumer wants to be).

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