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CUHK Business School Research Reveals Touch Screens Lead Consumers to Choose Unhealthy Food



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HONG KONG, CHINA - Media OutReach - October 25, 2017 - There is no doubt the Internet has changed our way of living. We can now do everything online: reading the news, shopping for the latest fashion, purchasing a movie ticket or the plane ticket for our next trip, and ordering our meals while sitting in our office or home. In fact, many fast food chains such as McDonald's, Pizza Hut and KFC enable customers to order food online through their websites or mobile apps. Likewise, in many restaurants, iPads are offered to customers who can select their food and drinks with a touch on the digital menu.

While we are enjoying the convenience brought by technology, have we thought about how the digital world has really changed our lives, and perhaps also our choices?

The findings of the research titled "Computer Interfaces and the Direct-Touch Effect: Can iPads Increase the Choice of Hedonic Food?" at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Business School have offered some interesting insights to the question.

Conducted by Associate Professors Hao Shen and Meng Zhang, both from CUHK Business School's Department of Marketing, with their collaborator Prof. Aradhna Krishna, Dwight F. Benton Professor of Marketing from University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, the study observed the increasing use of technology such as customized mobile apps in the domain of food choice, and asked the question: What effect do these digital devices have on customers' choice of food?

The Studies

In five laboratories studies with various groups of undergraduate students in two universities in Hong Kong, the researchers tested whether customers using different computer interfaces with and without a touchscreen would affect their choices of food. In other words, will there be any difference in their choices when they browse a pictorial menu online and select the food by touching the picture on the screen or by clicking the mouse on the desktop?



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In the first study, students were asked to choose from a pair of products online, one hedonic (a piece of cheesecake) and one utilitarian (a bowl of green salad). These two choices were pretested to be affectively superior (i.e., enjoyable and tempting) and cognitively superior (i.e., better for health). The group was divided into two with some participants using an iPad (i.e., touch), while others using a desktop with a mouse (i.e. non-touch).

To test whether the distance of choice buttons would affect their selections, another study asked participants to choose between a cup of hot chocolate and a cup of tea. But this time, the choice buttons were either next to or distant from the food items.

To test whether non-direct touch would make a difference, another study offered some participants a stylus to choose their food on the iPad, while others were using their fingers directly to touch on the iPad. Another group was using a desktop with a mouse. The choices this time were between a food item (a bowl of ice cream) and a non-food item (a USB flash drive).

Direct-Touch and Mental Interaction

All studies supported the researchers' hypothesis -- touching the screen facilitates the mental interaction with the product and makes consumers choose hedonic over utilitarian food items, a phenomenon which the researchers called the 'Direct-Touch' effect.

In the study when participants were using a stylus to touch the screen, the 'Direct-Touch' effect did not happen. In other words, using a stylus is the same as using a mouse to click on the screen.

"When consumers use an iPad and select the food by touching the pictures, they tend to select hedonic food over utilitarian food," says Prof. Shen. "They would be more likely to choose a cheesecake rather than a bowl of salad," he adds.

So what does touching the screen do to our brain?

"The Direct-Touch effect is similar to our natural reaction towards hedonic food -- the spontaneous urge to grab it. When we touch the picture of cheesecake on the iPad menu, it is like reaching out to grab the cheesecake in real life. Such an urge, however, is less strong for utilitarian food (e.g. a bowl of green salad)," explains Prof. Zhang.

"So touching a hedonic food picture rather than clicking it with a mouse leads to a higher purchase intention," she adds.

Implications

The study has significant implications for public policymakers and marketers, according to the professors.

"Previous research has found that touch can increase affective response towards an object and increase impulsive buying behavior. Our study has gone a step further to show simply asking consumers to order by touching the hedonic food image would be sufficient to increase their mental simulation of grabbing the food and wanting to purchase it," says Prof. Shen.

In a larger scope, the study has relevant implications for public policy, as different response modes can affect food choices, including unhealthy food, in our community.

"Our study result reveals that direct touch increases the choice of hedonic options. If computer interfaces can influence our food choices, consumers and public policy officials should be made aware of the effect so that they could adopt strategies to facilitate the choice of healthy food," he adds.

In terms of marketing, in today's technological world where more and more restaurants are offering touchscreen menus for efficiency, the study also implies that specific marketing strategies using different computer interfaces could be explored to yield desirable choices among consumers.

Reference:



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Hao Shen, Meng Zhang, and Aradhna Krishna (2016) Computer Interfaces and the "Direct-Touch" Effect: Can iPads Increase the Choice of Hedonic Food?. Journal of Marketing Research: October 2016, Vol. 53, No. 5, pp. 745-758.

This article was first published in the China Business Knowledge (CBK) website by CUHK Business School: <https://goo.gl/eTgbeS>.

About CUHK Business School

CUHK Business School comprises two schools -- Accountancy and Hotel and Tourism Management -- and four departments -- Decision Sciences and Managerial Economics, Finance, Management and Marketing. Established in Hong Kong in 1963, it is the first business school to offer BBA, MBA and Executive MBA programs in the region. Today, the School offers 8 undergraduate programs and 13 graduate programs including MBA, EMBA, Master, MSc, MPhil and Ph.D.

In the Financial Times Global MBA Ranking 2017, CUHK MBA is ranked 36th. In FT's 2017 EMBA ranking, CUHK EMBA is ranked 32nd in the world. CUHK Business School has the largest number of business alumni (34,000+) worldwide - many of whom are key business leaders. The School currently has about 4,400 undergraduate and postgraduate students and Professor Kalok Chan is the Dean of CUHK Business School.

More information is available at: <http://www.bschool.cuhk.edu.hk> or by connecting with CUHK Business School on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/cuhkbschool> and LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/school/3923680/>.

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