

THE INFLUENCE OF PRODUCT TRY-ON ON CONSUMERS: A CONCEPTUALIZATION

Abstract: This research focus on the concept of product try-on and aims to define it. What is a product try-on? How is it done in a store by consumers? Those questions have not been addressed in literature so far. We conducted a qualitative study, consisting in both interviews (with consumers) and a non-participant observation (in a furniture showroom). The results show that try-on is apparently a key moment in the purchasing process and allow us to propose a definition of that concept. We also propose a typology of the different forms of try-on that can be implemented.

Keywords: conceptual paper, distribution channel, experience goods, product try-on, purchase intention, retail

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Introduction

Recent studies show that, in 2017, 88% of consumers adopt a ROPO behaviour: they research online and then go to a store to finalize their purchase¹. In details, it appears that cultural goods are frequently purchased online (45% of online purchase) while apparel or furniture are mainly purchased in store (13% of online purchased only). More than showing that omni-channel consumption is growing, this raises the following question: why do consumer feel the need to see some products before purchasing them?

Many explanatory factors can be considered, but we decided to focus on one of them. Indeed, for apparel and furniture consumer might want to try before purchasing. Conversely, a book does not require a try-on. Thus, product try-on seems to be a potential explanatory factor. Literature suggests that the ability to judge the qualities of a product comfort consumers in their purchase decision (Goering, 1985). This might be even more true for experience goods, that require a high level of involvement from the consumer (Nelson, 1974; Murphy and Enis, 1986). Moreover, the impossibility of trying product online is one of the major obstacle to the purchase, especially for apparel and make-up (Blázquez, 2014).

But what is, concretely, a product try-on? Some researchers deal with the willingness to try a new product, mainly food or new services (Popielarz, 1967; Martins, Pelchat and Pliner, 1997; Ares and Gámbaro, 2007; Chaudhuri and Micu, 2014). Recently, some others explored the effects of virtualizing the try-on (Merle, Senecal and St-Onge, 2012; Racat and Capelli, 2014a). However, none of those papers really define the concept of trying a product. Moreover, they focus on specific kind of products (make-up, clothes, innovations) and do not consider the try-on as a real step of the purchasing process.

This article aims to fill this gap, and to highlight what constitutes a try-on. More specifically, our research questions are the following:

- How to define a product try-on?
- Are they different forms of try-on?
- Is there a link between product try-on and purchase intention?

The first part of this paper presents the conceptual framework. In a second part, we develop the qualitative methodology that was conducted. Results are then explained and discussed in the third and fourth parts. Our work contributes to the existing literature by conceptualizing the product try-on and providing a typology of the different forms of try-on.

1. Conceptual framework

1.1. Product try-on

The idea of trying a product often evokes appearance goods (make-up, apparel, glasses), for which consumers want to check if they fit. Yet, a large range of products can actually be tried. Indeed, most consumer want to drive a car before purchasing it, or visit a flat before renting it, in order to check the qualities of the good (Goering, 1985). In that sense, try-on appears to influence consumer's final choice to purchase or not.

1 <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/m-commerce-social-media-ropo-research-online-purchase-offline-lead-retail-trends-according-to-digitalbi-global-survey-253717951.html>

Literature, however, does not really address this issue. Product try-on has never been directly explored by researchers and has never been conceptualized. Most of them focus on the “willingness to try”, mostly for new food products, new brands, new services (Pelchat and Pliner, 1995; Martins, Pelchat and Pliner, 1997; Ares and Gámbaro, 2007; Chaudhuri and Micu, 2014; Southworth and Ha-Brookshire, 2016). Some authors also explore the link between perceived risk and willingness to try (Popielarz, 1967; Turner, Thomas and Reinsch Jr., 2004).

Recent studies have been conducted to show the impact of virtualizing a product try-on, through virtual reality or augmented reality. They mainly deal with apparel and cosmetic (Kim and Forstythe, 2008; Merle, Senecal and St-Onge, 2012; Racat and Capelli, 2014a, 2014b).

Eventually, the diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1995) seems to describe try-on most accurately. Rogers speaks about “trialability” and explains that it is one out of five determinants of the adoption of a new technology. Trialability improve the level of confidence towards the innovation.

Table 1 gathers the different concepts used in literature so far.

Concept	Applications	Author(s)
Trialability	Technologies	- Rogers, 1995
Virtual try-on	Apparel Cosmetic	- Kim and Forstythe, 2008 - Merle, Senecal and St-Onge, 2012 - Racat, Capelli, 2014a - Racat, Capelli, 2014b
Willingness to try	Food Services	- Ares, Gambaro, 2007 - Martins, Pelchat, Pliner, 1997 - Pelchat, Pliner, 1995 - Popierlaz, 1967 - Southworth, Ha-Brookshire, 2016 - Turner, Thomas and Reinsch Jr., 2004

Table 1. Product try-on in literature

1.2. Perceived risk

As mentioned above, literature suggests that product try-on reduce the potential risks linked to the purchase (Popielarz, 1967; Rogers, 1995). Thus, it seemed important to explore the concept of perceived risk in more details. This concept is defined as the potential loss feared by consumers when they make a purchase (Volle, 1995). Concretely, five types of risk exist: the financial risk, the psychological risk, the physical risk, the social risk and the functional one (Jacoby and Kaplan, 1972; Murphy and Enis, 1986; Stone and Grønhaug, 1993). We can think that product try-on is likely to reduce the perceived risk by playing a role on those five dimensions.

Literature also considers that perceived risk depends on the consumer’s involvement towards the product (Valette-Florence, 1989). Involvement is linked to the perception of product

attributes and of its symbolic meaning. Thus, a highly involved consumer will look for maximum information, in order to reduce the risk and to improve his level of confidence (Beck and Cri , 2016). In other words, perceived risk will be higher for shopping / experience goods than for convenience goods, which require lower involvement (Nelson, 1974; Murphy and Enis, 1986).

This article aims to explore the influence of product try-on on the five dimensions of perceived risk.

1.3. Purchase intention

Beyond perceived risk, we can also wonder whether product try-on is likely to impact purchase intention. Will a successful try-on improve this intention? Conversely, can an unsuccessful try-on discourage them?

Purchase process is usually divided in five steps : identifying a need, seeking for information, pre-purchase evaluation, purchase, post-purchase evaluation (Solomon, 2009). Purchase intention refers to the pre-purchase evaluation and is influenced by the intention of use (Hoffmann, Roehrich and Mathieu, 2006). In that sense, we can assume that product try-on will impact the intention of use and, thus the purchase intention.

Among the five senses, touch also play an important role in purchase intention. It determines the evaluation of the product and their final decision (Rook and Fisher, 1995; Stevens and Green, 1996; Masson, Tossan and Adolphe, 2015). This impact is even more important for people with a high “need for touch” (Childers *et al.*, 2001; Krishna, 2012).

This work explores the potential link that can exist between product try-on and purchase intention.

2. Method

Since our goal was to understand what constitutes a product try-on for consumers, we chose a qualitative method. First, we conducted semi-directives interviews. Second, we did a non-participant observation in store.

2.1. Semi-directive interviews

We chose to conduct interviews with consumers because, to define product try-on, it seemed important to ask consumers directly. We opted for a semi-directive format, that encourages the spontaneous expression of feelings and perceptions (Gummesson, 2005; Belk, 2007). The process was as follows: first, respondents were asked to speak about their last purchase experience. Then, our questions focused on product try-on in a general perspective. The main themes were the trying habits, the expectations towards try-on, the influence on the final decision to purchase the product or not.

We chose to focus on experience goods, and more precisely on apparel and furniture. Those goods require from the consumer a high involvement in terms of time and money, and the perceived risk is higher than for other kind of goods. Concretely, products for which a try-on is necessary are mainly experience goods.

A total of 16 interviews has been made, with a convenience sample of men and women (equally represented) from 18 to 65 years old. The interviews have been transcribed, coded and analyzed with NVivo.

2.2. Non-participant observation

The interviews allowed us to identify a potential definition of product try-on and to better understand the role of this step. However, we wanted to observe concretely what has been declared in the interviews, and to catch attitudes (Badot and Lemoine, 2008; Badot *et al.*, 2009; Ezan, 2009). For this reason, we decided to implement a non-participant observation. In this case, it is a direct observation (Dion, 2008).

It took place in the showroom of a British furniture brand. Pure player at the beginning, this brand opened a physical place to allow consumers to see, touch and try the products before ordering them online. There is no direct selling in the showroom because there is no stock available. In that sense, this place is totally dedicated to try-on.

Consumers were observed during their entire tour of the store. Based on the interviews results, we developed a checklist of different facts to observe more specifically. At the end of their visit, some of them were asked to answer a few questions. In total, 202 consumers have been observed and 27 have been interviewed. **Table 2** explains the entire process.

Place	Furniture showroom
Choice of people observed	Random selection from the moment people entered the store
Process	Passive observation consisting in following people during their visit. Interviews at the end of their visit
Observed elements	Time spent in the store before the trial of the first product Type of product tried Number of product tried Time spent trying Socialization (yes/no) Type of socialization (salesman, relatives, friends, ...)

Table 2. Observation process

3. Product try-on: from exploration to confirmation

3.1. Conceptualization

Our respondents are strongly used to try their product before buying it. They always try but not always in store. For instance, if there are too many people waiting for the fitting rooms, consumers might prefer to try the product at home (*“it takes time. And it is annoying to spent too much time in stores”*). Some of them also want to check the compatibility between the new product and the ones they already have. Buying experience goods on the Internet seems to be difficult for most of them because they need to see the product before. It is even totally

excluded for some people (*"I will never buy on the Internet without trying", "I don't think I could buy online without seeing the product for real"*).

Most of our respondents explain that they already want to buy the product they are trying. Thus, try-on appears as a confirmation of their choice (*"Trying the product will confirm my desire to buy it", "9 times out of 10, that will validate my intention to take it", "Usually, I already decided I wanted to buy it"*).

In store, during the observation, people explain that they mainly come to try the product before ordering it online (*"We wanted to confirm that was the right product", "we have already chosen the style, we just came to check the product"*). Once again, the intention is already formed. The try-on itself is rather brief (1 or 2 minutes) but people often try several products of the same type (eg. A couch). Concretely, trying consists in simulating a daily use of the product.

The results suggest that people want, by trying, to reduce the risk (*"I want to be sure that I make the right choice"*). The observation showed that the risk is particularly important due to the price and the length during which people will keep the product (*"a couch, we keep it 10 years"*). Thus, when visiting the store, they want to be reassured.

We also noticed that, when trying a product, there is an important social dimension. This can be a socialization with the salesman, with relatives, with friends (*"I like to have another opinion", "I take pictures to ask my girlfriend's opinion"*). However, this external validation does not seem to be a determining factor of the final decision. It is rather a way to, again, reassure themselves.

When we asked the respondents, what would be their own definition of product try-on, they mainly evoked the idea of adequacy between the product and themselves. This can be a physical adequacy or an adequacy to their environment, for instance in the case of furniture.

Thus, we propose the following definition:

"Make at least one use of a product we wish to buy, in order to:

- Ensure that the product corresponds to what we expect***
- Ensure the product matches ourselves, our social and physical environment and our needs"***

3.2. Typology

As we just mentioned, product try-on helps consumers to validate their decision. However, depending on each consumer and its priorities, product try-on can take different forms in store. For instance, Marie, 26 years old, explains: *"to try a product can make me do several things. Deciding to buy, deciding not to buy, or deciding to buy something I wasn't looking for"*. Thus, we wanted to explore the concept product try-on in more details, by proposing a typology.

We identified four types of try-on, that mainly depend on consumers' objectives: confirmatory try-on, exploratory try-on, informative try-on and reassuring try-on. In some cases, they can coexist. **Table 3** summarizes the main characteristic of each try-on.

Confirmatory try-on:

The first type of try-on we highlight is the confirmatory one. This is the most frequently observed among our respondents. This try-on takes place when the consumer has already

identified a product (or a short list of products) able to fit with his need or his desire. Here, the intention to buy the product is already formed. The product might have been identified online or during a previous visit in store. The objective is to confirm the intention and, if the try-on is unsuccessful, then the consequence will be to set aside this intention. A couple explains: *“we wanted to confirm that the product seen online was the good one for us”*.

During the observation, many consumers evoked the website of the brand, both between themselves and when we interview them (*“I saw things on the website and I wanted to see them for real”*). Moreover, in their discourse, they often mention the idea of “seeing for real”, meaning to materialize their idea of the product.

Exploratory try-on:

Try-on can be considered as exploratory when the consumer did not identify the right product to fulfil his need or desire. This is basically the opposite of the previous situation. Thus, there is no pre-existent intention of purchasing any good. In some cases, consumers don’t even have any need. Product try-on is, then, used as a way of finding the inspiration (*“we are looking for new styles for our living room”*).

For this second type of try-on, the relation with purchase intention is reversed. For the confirmatory try-on, the try-on takes place because the intention exists. Here, the intention is a result of the try-on. It is also important to mention that both confirmatory and exploratory try-on can exist at the same time (*“We need some types of furniture, but we also came to have a look around”*).

Informative try-on:

The informative try-on consists in seeking for information about a product and its characteristics by trying it. For instance, wearing a jumper to check if the wool is pleasant to wear. In that case, people can totally discover the good without having any information before (*“I need to check if the color is OK with my skin”, “There are different qualities of leather so I need to touch it”*). Conversely, they can wish to ensure that the information they already have are real (*“on the Internet, colors are not always the same as in the store, we can be disappointed”, “Sometimes, there are differences between what we see online and what we see for real”*).

Reassuring try-on:

Finally, the goal of trying a product can be to reassure oneself towards its decision. Depending on the product and on consumer’s priorities, the level perceived risk will change. Try-on, then, is a way to reduce that risk (*“when we buy furniture, trying is a way of reducing the risk”, “if we cannot see the product, buying it is risky”*). In some cases, the risk is linked to the product itself. In other cases, the risk is linked to the act of buying.

Type	Objective
Confirmatory try-on	Confirm a pre-existent purchase intention towards a product identified before the in-store visit
Exploratory try-on	Looking for inspiration to fulfil a need or a desire
Informative try-on	Gather concrete information about a product and its features
Reassuring try-on	Reduce the perceived risk associate to purchase and comfort oneself purchase intention

Table 3. Product try-on typology

4. Discussion

As mentioned in introduction, the objectives of that study were to understand what product try-on is, how it is made by consumers, and to investigate a link between try-on and purchase intention. Our results show different things.

First, try-on is mostly seen as a way to check and validate. Checking because, by trying a product, consumers ensure that the product will fit their needs and desire. And validation because try-on mostly takes place when the purchase is already planned. In that sense, our definition can be distinguished of the “willingness to try” (Popielarz, 1967; Pelchat and Pliner, 1995; Martins, Pelchat and Pliner, 1997; Chaudhuri and Micu, 2014). It is rather close to Rogers’ trialability (1995), since it improves the level of confidence towards the product, even if our conceptualization is broader.

Second, discourses show that try-on reassure consumers towards their decision. Financial and social risk are the most important when people try a product, they are the ones consumers want to reduce first and foremost (Jacoby and Kaplan, 1972; Murphy and Enis, 1986). Those findings raise the following question: are these risks more important because of the type of product we chose? (eg. Experience goods).

The fact that others dimensions are secondary is consistent with literature, that present the access to information as a way to reduce the risk (Durand-Mégret, Vanheems and Ezan, 2016). Indeed, when they visit a store, most of our respondents have seen the website. Some of them have also read customer’s notifications. Thus, physical, psychological and functional risks are already partly reduced.

Moreover, it seems that the relationship between purchase intention and try-on can take numerous forms. In the case of a confirmatory try-on, purchase intention exists before the try-on. Try-on won’t create that intention. Conversely, in the case of an exploratory try-on, purchase intention does not exist, and try-on will indeed create it. However, among our respondents, the first case is more common. Those findings are also consistent with literature, that shows intention of use impacts purchase intention (Hoffmann, Roehrich and Mathieu, 2006). Here, we show that try-on allow consumers to use the product at least once. He projects himself using it (or not). However, we notice that the time spent trying is rather short, what is surprising since most respondents explain coming to store especially for trying. That suggests try-on would be a way of rationalizing consumers’ decisions.

Eventually, behaviors observed in store confirm the importance of touch in forming purchase intention (Rook and Fisher, 1995; Stevens and Green, 1996). This is by touching the product that consumers evaluate its level of quality.

Conclusion & limitations

This article is the first one, as far as we know, to offer a real conceptualization of product try-on. More than understanding this specific step of the buying process, we also highlight four different types of try-on. Thus, we contribute to the purchase process literature, and propose a new approach in understanding purchase intention formation.

From a managerial perspective, our work introduces different implications. Indeed, try-on appears as a central element when deciding to buy a product or not. However, this step does not seem to be a great concern for brands. We suggest brands pay greater attention to try-on, to offer consumers a better experience of try-on in store.

Nonetheless, this work has some limitations. First, it focuses on experience goods. Even if people mostly try this type of goods, it could be interesting to extend our study to other types

of products. In addition, we do not take in account the new forms of try-on, such as the virtualized ones. Thus, a similar work could be conducted for virtual try-on.

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