

Digital Customers and Commerce

The Need for Touch

Summary

This report summarizes a study of Danish design products and consumers' need for touch. We first discuss the need for touch, why it exists, and why it matters. We then discuss some common effective practices for managing the need for touch in online sales environments, as well as some promising new practices.

Background

Danish design has become well-respected around the world, particularly in industries like fashion, furniture, and architecture. A common feature of Danish design is the quality of physical materials, the consideration of surrounding context, and functionalist innovation. These principles have built on the success of several famous designers, known for the elegance and subtlety of their work, such as Hans Wegner and Finn Juhl¹. The focus on subtlety and context also creates a pressure on Danish design brands to showcase individual items in a way that allows consumers to appreciate the small touches that differentiate their designs from other, often cheaper alternatives. For this reason, many brands maintain a strong presence in retail stores and showrooms. Brands also rely on important annual events, such as 3DaysOfDesign and Copenhagen Fashion Week, which help them network with retailers and co-construct the narrative that acts as a backdrop for new collections.

The Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020 was an obvious challenge for Danish design brands. Brands were required to close their physical stores inside and outside Denmark, as were third party retailers. This forced these brands to prioritize online sales. For many brands, this meant online tools such as social media and websites, which were previously promotional or complementary sales channels, became their only reliable way to reach customers. Roles were transformed inside and outside organizations as brands struggled to replace established sales and marketing *modus operandi* with new tools and/or new customer segments.

Yet, with crisis comes opportunity. Many brands viewed the new reliance on digital tools as a means of reconsidering older sales and marketing patterns. For example, the shipment of items to retail stores can present costly and environmentally questionable logistical and storage needs, when compared with direct online sales. The need for physical stores also makes it difficult to reach geographically distant markets, unless the brand makes substantial infrastructural or relational investments in each individual local market. Perhaps most controversially, some brands are also frustrated by the perceived ‘watering down’ of brand identity, when they sell through third party retailers with their own perceived values and narratives. Many Danish brands are therefore keen to build on some of the digital practices they have developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, rather than returning faithfully to all of their previous physical sales and marketing habits.

So, how do we figure out which practices to keep, which to reinstate, and which new possibilities to explore? First, we must understand *why* Danish brands have historically relied upon physical stores in their sales channels. We can then begin to understand the trade-offs of new approaches, and the types of values they offer.

We approach this problem in this report from the perspective of ‘need for touch’, i.e., a preference for haptic information obtained through one’s handsⁱⁱ. We used a systematic literature review to identify the core drivers of need for touch (NFT), as well as some of the factors known to influence NFT in different consumer settings. We spoke to a range of Danish Fashion and Furniture brands and customers to collate and contrast their experiences, and to begin theorizing about possible future sales and marketing opportunities. This included 60 interviews from a previous project and another 3 ‘top up’ interviews to delve into some emerging insights.

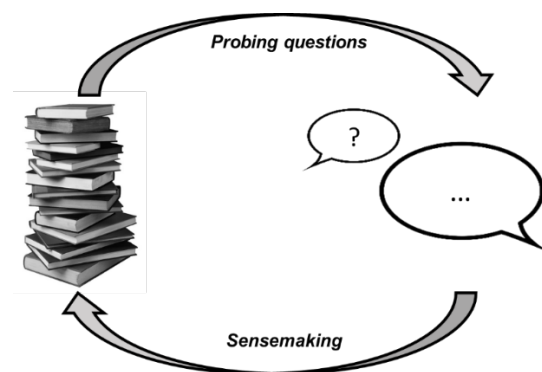


Figure 1. Cyclical research process

Reasons why customers feel the need for touch

A significant body of literature has examined the core drivers of NFT. These drivers can be differentiated according to three distinct needs (see Figure 2).

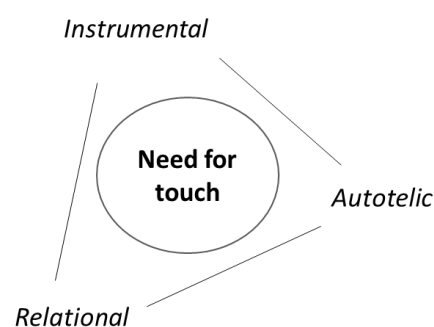


Figure 2. The three drivers of NFT

1. *Instrumental*. This is utilitarian and goal-oriented. There are some types of information that customers feel they can get most reliably from touch, such as weight or smoothness.
2. *Autotelic*. This is emotional and enjoyment-based. Some things feel nice to touch, just as some sounds are nice to hear, some images are nice to see, and some things are nice to smell and taste.
3. *Relational*. This is about association-building and personal identity. People form connections to the things and people they care about by touching them. This is the least well-described aspect of NFT in the consumer literature, with more historic discussion in studies of mental health and developmental psychology. However, the concept of ‘touch starvation’ has broadened during Covid-19, as individuals became increasingly aware of the need to physically interact with one another and the objects/environments that are important to them.

Factors that moderate the need for touch

We performed a systematic literature review of business and scientific databases, which identified 81 journal articles that studied NFT in consumer settings. We constructed a concept-centric matrixⁱⁱⁱ to identify:

- (i) The individual concepts linked with NFT
- (ii) The number of different sources in which each concept was mentioned
- (iii) The higher-order categories that could be used to capture and relate individual concepts.

To develop higher-order categories, we first semantically grouped individual concepts. For example, mentions of ‘weight’, ‘product material’, and ‘product construction’ were all considered forms of *product quality*. This reduced the initial set of concepts from 132 into 13 categories. We next grouped these categories according to three emerging process stages.

Product characteristics. These described the features of a product that, other things being equal, caused those products to trigger NFT. Three features seem especially important, based on both the literature and the interviews with brands.

First, the *physical shapes and surfaces* of a product^{iv}. This includes the smoothness/bumpiness of a product, the hardness/softness, and the surface complexity, or even the color. These qualities make it more difficult to infer information about the product from just looking at it. They can also add interest and make objects more distinctive, or suggest an attention to detail on behalf of the creator.

Second, the *physical quality* of a product can mean that either individuals instrumentally feel the need to haptically inspect the object, such as wiggling the legs of a chair, or they anticipate a pleasant autotelic sensation from touching it, such as running their fingers over a fabric. There also seems to be an increased need for touch when customers participate in constructing a product^v, a process that is especially relevant for flat-pack furniture that can be easily shipped long distances.

Third, the *design/psychology behind a product* can impact consumers’ NFT. Some products have a perceived elegance, mystery, humor, or beauty about the way they look or operate. This encourages consumers to interact with those products, both for fun and to better understand the designers’ intent^{vi}.

Moderating factors. These described the different situational influences that exacerbate or attenuate the tendency of a product to trigger NFT. Four moderators seem especially important from literature and interviews.

The first and perhaps best documented refers to *individual traits*. Some people are naturally more prone to NFT, while others are less. There are many other individual traits that also seem to moderate NFT^{vii}. Some of these are tied up with consumers' attitudes towards shopping, such as age, gender, and cultural differences. These differences mean some individuals are more inclined to pay attention to haptic information, and to derive joy from touching products. Others moderate NFT because they reflect a reduced need for haptic information, e.g., individuals with a high propensity to trust may feel lower NFT, as may individuals with strong drive for environmentally friendly products. Finally, some moderators reflect an increased relational connection to products, such as opinion leadership/mavenism and a sense of personal fashion innovativeness.

The second moderator of NFT is the *sales context*. Sometimes these moderators are because the uncertainty is low, so individuals feel less need for additional information, e.g., if they perceive a brand is reputable. Similarly, sometimes a consumer will form associations to the brand because of how it is presented and may even feel a sense of psychological involvement towards the design. The context may also matter because it produces pleasant feelings in other ways, notably because prices are reduced or a consumer is in a mood that is conducive to joy and risk-taking^{viii}.

The third moderator is similar to the second but subtly different - consumers' *personal experiences*^{ix}. These allow individuals to leverage their memories and imagination to fill in informational or experiential gaps in the sales process.

The fourth moderator is the *sales interface* itself. 3D presentations and material salience are often a useful substitute for actual touch, as they provide greater visual detail. Haptic information can also reduce NFT by helping individuals mentally construct products. Packaging can also add information and haptic interest. Perhaps most interestingly, touch screens also appear to satisfy some of consumers' NFT, as it simulates the physical movements those consumers would use to touch products if they were within reach and thus increases psychological ownership^x.

Sales outcomes. These described the actual impact of NFT on sales. NFT seems to have five major impacts.

The most obvious is *purchase decisions*. However, this is not always straightforward. While purchasing is usually more likely from NFT, there is evidence that some product presentations that seem like they should allow touch but do not (sometimes called 'sensory blocking') can frustrate consumers and actually increase sales, and subsequent compensatory touching^{xi}.

NFT also impacts on *channel perceptions*. The literature suggests consumers tend to use the channels that satisfy their informational and emotional needs.^{xii} In practice, this is more complicated, as most brands access the same consumers through multiple channels. For example, consumers describe that they often browse products on their phone or work machines, then buy them later on their tablets or laptops. This is difficult to analyze from the brands' perspective, as GDPR laws make it difficult to connect user behaviors across devices, meaning it is hard to know which channels satisfy or frustrate consumers' NFT.

After the sale, NFT also impacts on *product perceptions*, *brand perceptions*, and *product appropriation*^{xiii}. Each of these represents the extension of within-purchase influences, where

products with confirm or challenge consumers' earlier expectations. The confirmation of expectations increases a consumer's confidence they understand products and brands, allowing them to increase endowment and deepen associations. In contrast, surprises increase uncertainty for consumers and reset the formation of associations.

Common effective practices

Four common effective practices received support from brands and consumers throughout the project.

- (i) **Storytelling media.** Many brands dedicated large amounts of time to sharing anecdotes and experiences with consumers, for example through Instagram stories. Often, the focus of these stories was on the brand themselves, rather than the products. This allowed brands to build associations and increase consumers' confidence and sense of identity with the brand.
- (ii) **Conversation media.** In addition to storytelling, many brands made a heightened effort to interact directly with consumers and respond to queries. The shift to online created a potential distance, as consumers were no longer always able to walk into stores and speak with sales staff. Hence, many consumers enjoyed the sense of care and attention they received from the brands through social media like Facebook, in particular.
- (iii) **Contextualization media.** The move online naturally decoupled products from their physical and social environment. Many brands responded by focusing on shared environments and positioning designs in context. Designers also noted they felt especially aware of their physical environments, as they were limited where they could go and with whom they could interact. Consumers felt similarly,

meaning the ability to position a product against a shared physical and social environment created a valued sense of connection.

- (iv) ‘Wow’ events and technologies. Having lost some of their regular physical consumer traffic in carefully designed stores, many brands felt they had to work harder to create the types of mood that would excite consumers enough to trigger a purchase. While this may seem superficial, consumers perceived brands’ innovativeness and energy with these events and technologies as indicative of their larger innovativeness and energy, suggesting the investment of time and money was worthwhile.

Promising new practices

The first promising new practice is the use of **hybrid spaces**. Most brands are expanding the assemblage of sales channels they inhabit. This is likely to grow in the future, as consumers take increasing responsibility for the channels they use and the manner in which they combine them. This allows them to extract information from some channels, and joy and associations from others. It also triangulates information and potentially creates a sense of brand community from their interactions with other consumers. This may include new online spaces, such as a growing breadth of social media platforms and online communities. It may also include more dedicated physical spaces. Several brands are exploring the option of opening new premises where consumers can physically inspect items, or expanding their sample ranges that can be sent to larger clients. Most fundamentally, it seems likely that the interconnectedness of spaces will grow. For example, many online stores are beginning to map their interfaces to physical stores in a way that lends to progressive browsing, i.e., you know the specific shelf to find items from the website when you visit a physical store. Other

stores have been experimenting with virtual additions to physical stores, such as augmented reality.

The second promising new practice is the use of **3D online spaces**. These are becoming more and more sophisticated, as providers find new dynamics to engage consumers. Many brands are beginning to include 3D projection files, so consumers can view items such as furniture in their homes. Other brands are creating online showrooms that can be navigated in 3D spaces, either using traditional interfaces or head-mounted displays, such as VR. These can satisfy some of consumers information needs, providing the display quality is sufficiently high. However, they still do not completely address NFT where products or individuals make the need especially pronounced. For example, while some consumers are eager to use these online channels, others find them frustrating when the physical quality is a major purchase motivator.

The third promising new practice is the **focus on social values**. Most of the brands who participated felt they had to find new ways to differentiate themselves from cheaper international alternatives. A common approach was to appeal to shared values, such as renewable materials, a desire to maintain local high streets, or intangible qualities, such as attitudes to fashion and design. These moved the focus from the physicality of the products, so changed consumers' purchase parameters and subsequent evaluations.

Conclusion

This report only scratches the surface of why consumers feel NFT and how Danish brands can manage that need, when selling online. Several ongoing research projects are exploring different aspects of this topic, such as the changing role of showcase events, the tendency of brands to explore new structures or revert to older structures post Covid-19, or the dynamics

of new consumer ecosystems among online sellers. We hope this report highlights the vast potential for innovation in this space, as well as the fundamental consumer drivers that future innovations must consider.

References and notes

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^x An interesting source to read more about interfaces, particularly touch screens and NFT is Brasel, S. A., & Gips, J. (2014). Tablets, touchscreens, and touchpads: How varying touch interfaces trigger psychological ownership and endowment. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 24(2), 226-233.

^{xi} This is an interesting and complicated effect, which can paradoxically increase sales. For more, see Ringler, C., Sirianni, N. J., Gustafsson, A., & Peck, J. (2019). Look but Don't Touch! The Impact of Active Interpersonal Haptic Blocking on Compensatory Touch and Purchase Behavior. *Journal of Retailing*, 95(4), 186-203.

^{xii} An interesting source to read more about NFT and channel perceptions is Aw, E. C. X., Basha, N. K., Ng, S. I., & Ho, J. A. (2021). Searching online and buying offline: Understanding the role of channel-, consumer-, and product-related factors in determining webrooming intention. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 58, 102328.

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