

# Holiday shopping online: Don't overwhelm consumers with too many images

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If presented with looking at an image or reading a paragraph describing the same product, consumers often prefer the visual option. However, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, visual presentation can lead to information overload and result in less systematic consideration especially when making a purchasing decision.

"Consumers prefer product information that is presented visually in pictures rather than verbally in words. Visual presentation feels easier and faster to process, and with visual depiction consumers perceive more variety in their selection," write authors Claudia Townsend (University of Miami) and Barbara E. Kahn (Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania).

The authors studied how consumers process visual information in both small and large groups of images. Their experiments used eye-tracking software to identify whether the participants processed the image groupings in a more random pattern or in a more systematic, left to right, approach similar to reading.

The results demonstrated that while people claim to prefer visual depictions, there are choice situations in which they should take more time to process the information more deeply. The authors also determined that small image sets are key to reducing visual overload, the less systematic processing of information resulting in a negative influence on perceptual and behavioral consequences.

An example of visual overload is in mobile apps, which heavily favor graphics in the user interface. The use of too much imagery can unintentionally lead consumers to bypass the point of purchase.

"While visual images are fun, there may be a tendency to gloss over them rather than make a purchase," the authors conclude. "At the point of actual consideration for purchase, a text-based interface should cause [consumers](#) to slow down, review each option more carefully, and be less likely to opt out of the choice."

**More information:** Claudia Townsend and Barbara E. Kahn. "The 'Visual Preference Heuristic': The Influence of Visual versus Verbal Depiction on Assortment Processing, Perceived Variety, and Choice Overload." *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2014.

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