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ABSTRACT

The Internet has provided a new advantage for counterfeiters - the opportunity to sell goods without prior consumer inspection. Leveraging this opportunity, deceitful purveyors of imitation goods use product presentation and website trust features to sell counterfeit goods as genuine. Based on trust and deception theories we propose that there are two categories of counterfeit deception mechanisms online: product level information and seller level information. Counterfeiters conceal the signals that identify the product as a fake using product presentation, and present themselves as legitimate business entities using website trust features. We find that advanced product presentation has a positive influence on consumers' perception of the authenticity of products. The results of this study are informative and might be effective in further exploration of deception mechanisms in online counterfeit markets.

Keywords

Counterfeit deception, product presentation, theory of deception, trust, website trust features

INTRODUCTION

Deception is an issue prone to occur in commercial transactions due to information asymmetry and opportunistic behavior. Because of the limited amount of information available in cyberspace and the difficulties of verifying such information, deception in electronic environments is most prevalent (Mintz, 2002; Rowe, 2006). When consumers are purchasing tangible goods with specific characteristics such as designer goods, electronics or pharmaceutical products, they may unconsciously become victims of counterfeit deception schemes, depending on how the sellers present themselves and their offerings online.

Product counterfeiting is unauthorized manufacturing or commercialization of goods whose characteristics are protected by trademarks, patents and copyrights (Cordell, Wongtada and Kieschnick 1996). Although a wide range of goods can be manufactured illegally, the favored objects of counterfeiters are products that convey a status brand image and require somewhat uncomplicated production technology (Penz and Stottinger, 2005). According to the U.S. Customs Office (2007), the top commodities preferred by counterfeiters include footwear, apparel, watches, pharmaceuticals and electronics.

Counterfeiting is estimated to bring in about $600 billion annually in worldwide sales (International Anti-Counterfeiting Coalition, 2008). According to the online brand protection company MarkMonitor, $137 billion in counterfeit goods are sold online in 2008. Since the internet does not provide an opportunity for customers to examine the product before purchasing, they must rely on the information provided by sellers through text-based descriptions, pictures and more recently, videos. It is therefore very easy for unscrupulous merchants to manipulate website design and product characteristics to make unsupportable claims about the condition or origin of their offerings.

Counterfeit product trade is conducted in two types of markets (Grossman and Shapiro, 1988b). The first type is a *non-deceptive market* where consumers can easily differentiate knockoffs from genuine items. The second type of markets, that Grossman and Shapiro (1998a) term as *deceptive counterfeit markets*, consists of an environment where consumers cannot differentiate fake from authentic due to a lack of information. In this paper we focus on deceptive markets and consider the effect of counterfeiting that happens as a result of product misrepresentation

We propose that there are two categories of deception mechanisms online: product level information and seller level information. In order to successfully deceive potential buyers, sellers of fake goods must engage in two types of activities: concealing the signals that identify the product as a fake using effective product presentation, and presenting themselves as legitimate business entities using website trust features. Drawing on research in trust and deception we attempt to answer the following question:

What mechanisms are successful in inducing potential buyers to trust the authenticity of products sold online?

This paper intends to make theoretical and practical contributions to the literature on deception and trust, and to shed light on website design features that lead users to trust counterfeiters online. At the theoretical level we apply and expand the Theory of Deception by Johnson et al. (2001). At the pragmatic level we seek to inform online consumers about deception detection.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: first we describe the Theory of Deception by Johnson et al. (2001) that is used to support a hypothesis regarding product level information with focus on product presentation; then, we review the constructs of trust and develop a hypothesis regarding seller level information based on website features; the next section introduces the research model and a hypothesis of interaction effect. Then, we describe the research methodology, data analysis and discussion of results, and conclude with the potential areas for future research.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Product Level Information

Deception and fraud have received extensive attention in academic literature (Buller and Burgoon 1996; DePaulo et al. 1989; Ekman 1992; Hyman 1989; Johnson et al. 2001). Deception is the form of information manipulation which occurs when a deceiver induces a misrepresentation to influence the behavior of a victim (Johnson et al. 2001). Turner et al. (1975) were the first to document that deceptiveness occurs due to manipulation of information. They propose that information can be manipulated through concealment and distortion. This finding is consistent with Ekman (1992) who proposed that there are two major deception strategies – concealment and falsifying. In concealment, the deceiver hides some information without saying anything untrue. In falsifying, the deceiver adds false information as if it were true.

The theory of deception by Johnson et al. (2001) describes the occurrence of intentional deception. The theory explains deception from both the deceiver and the victim sides. The deceiver tries to change the environment in such a way that the victim mistakenly accepts misrepresented facts as true and behaves in accordance with the deceiver's manipulation. The victims, on the other hand, may be able to detect deception by telling the difference between their expectations and the information given by the deceiver. However, if a potential victim does not possess enough knowledge or experience in the domain in which the deception is likely to occur, the deceiver may have chances to succeed. Grazioli (2004) suggests that Johnson's theory of deception is consistent with other deception theories, however it is more suitable in situations of low interactivity and interpersonality, such as deceptions that occur in the business world and the internet.

According to Johnson's theory of deception, in order to mislead, the deceiver hides or simulates attributes of a product, and by so doing, attempts to not only disrupt the victim's process of seeking information but to disrupt the victim's process of information assessment as well. As the majority of retail websites currently utilize text and pictures to present product information (Lightner and Eastman, 2002), exaggerating or overstating product features becomes possible through product presentation manipulation. Product presentation manipulation is an appropriate deception tactic in an online counterfeit context, as it may be used to make consumers believe that products they want to purchase are authentic when in fact they are not. As product presentation is intangible in nature, consumers are likely to question the believability and quality of the product represented. To reduce product quality uncertainty and increase believability, the deceiver must let the consumer inspect the product from every angle. To do so, the deceiver might use advanced product presentation techniques that include multiple pictures of the product and/or more sophisticated video and virtual product experience designs.

Prior research confirms that advanced presentation online affects purchase intent by reducing apparent risk, creating better mood, and providing an entertaining shopping experience (Park, Lennon and Stoel, 2005). However, if advanced product presentation depicts a counterfeit product, users may recognize pitfalls in the product that will influence their attitudes and change their purchase intentions. Therefore, to influence consumers' favorable perception of the product, the deceiver may use authentic images in which nothing seems to violate the expectations of the consumer. In this situation, even sophisticated and technologically competent consumers may believe that the image corresponds to the product that will be sold because there is no discrepancy between their expectations and the product presentation. Therefore, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Advanced product presentation will reduce users' perception of counterfeit deception online.

Seller Level Information

Barnett (2005) suggests that the distribution channel of goods plays an important role in recognizing counterfeits. He argues that if the product is sold in a venue populated by unauthorized dealers such as Canal Street in New York City, even untrained consumers are able to clearly identify that products are not original and vendors are selling copies. The abundance of commercial websites makes it difficult for consumers to differentiate between sellers offering original products and sellers offering replicas. Therefore, unscrupulous merchants have to establish a trusting relationship with potential customers to promote themselves as a reliable distribution channel. Trust is a crucial aspect of any dyadic (buyer-seller) relationship in which a trustor (buyer) cannot control the behavior of a trustee (seller) that in turn can lead to negative consequences of one

party not complying with contractual requirements (Mayer et al. 1995). Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky and Vitale (2000) define trust in an online store as the buyer's readiness to put faith in the seller in a situation where the buyer is vulnerable to the seller.

According to Grewal et al. (2004), online stores have limited ability to signal trust due to their incapacity to convey longevity. Unlike physical stores that require significant investments into property, personnel and inventory, online stores enjoy low entry cost and are relatively easy and inexpensive to maintain. The minimal expenses required for entering and exiting online marketplaces create doubts for consumers as they are uncertain if the online retailer will stay in business for a long time (Jarvenpaa and Tractinsky, 1999). Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) explains environments with incomplete information. When the costs of being deceived are high, consumers may demand more reliable signals (Donath, 2007) to form expectations about the business' ability to deliver quality products. In this regard, logical inconsistencies in the identity of the seller, such as mismatches between company name and email address or inconsistencies in links available through the website, provide useful signals to detect deception.

A study performed by Cheskin Research/Sapient (1999) identified six fundamental features that signal website trust including brand, ease of navigation, fulfillment, presentation, the latest technology and seals of approval. Roy et al. (2001) found a strong relationship between the website interface and trust. Wang and Emurian (2005) created a framework of four dimensions of website features associated with trust including graphic design dimension (colors and images); structure design (easy navigation, no broken links); content design (product information, seals of approval); and social cue design (communication media). Kim and Benbasat (2006) through intensive literature review identified that trust in e-commerce is communicated via seals of approval, brand and reputation, fulfillment (privacy and security policy and efficient communications with consumers), and referrals, feedback and links to other reputable websites. Therefore, websites with visible trust features are likely to influence buyers' trust towards the seller and further encourage shopping activity. Depending on the website content and design characteristics, buyers will make their judgment of the overall usability, credibility and attractiveness of the website which in turn will lead to a positive or negative attitude towards the authenticity of offerings. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Higher trust towards a website will reduce users' perception of counterfeit deception online.

The Combination of Product Level and Seller Level Information

Users' perception of counterfeit deception varies depending on the combination of product presentation and the level of trust conveyed by the website. Advanced product presentation that permits the inspection of the product from every angle eliminates product uncertainty and forms more favorable perception of the product. In combination with well-designed website containing trust features, advanced product presentation may form positive attitudes towards the website and influence users' favorable perception of the authenticity of the offerings. Therefore, we propose that there is an interaction effect between product presentation and trust towards the website that plays a significant role in determining overall perception of counterfeit deception.

Hypothesis 3: Users' perception of counterfeit deception in the advanced product presentation and high trust condition is the lowest among all conditions.

Research Model

Fig. 1 presents a model of user behavior that relates product presentation as product level information and website trust as seller level information.
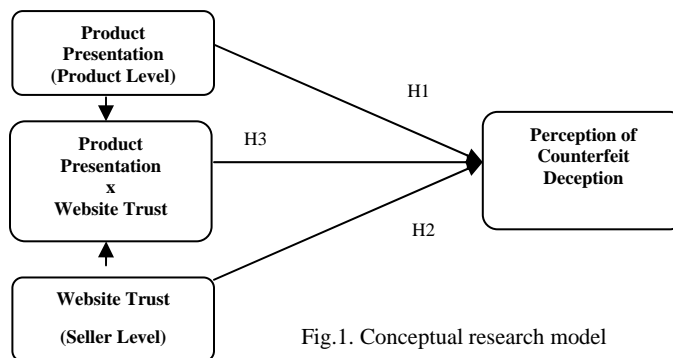

Fig.1. Conceptual research model

RESEARCH METHODS

In order to test the research model (Fig. 1) we conducted a 2x2 between subjects factorial experiment. Two identical websites were created for the purpose of the experiment. The level of trust was manipulated based on Kim and Benbasat (2003) framework that identifies key trust related issues in commercial websites: 1) personal information security; 2) customer services; 3) store presence. Personal information security was operationalized through the Customer Privacy Notice page that contained information about security, information sharing, cookies, and third-party advertisers. Customer services were operationalized through the Customer Support page that contained contact information, "100% satisfaction guarantee" return policy, and customers' testimonials. Store presence was supported by the Third Party Certificate such as Verisign.

The website in a high trust condition contained Customer Privacy Notice page, Customer Support page, and Verisign logo. The website in a low trust condition omitted these features. The websites had identical neutral names - www.onlinewatches.com to avoid the influence of domain name recognition (Kamis et al. 2008) and override the interaction of a familiar brand name and deception (Grazioli, 2004).

Product presentation was manipulated through product images. Each website had two different versions: 1) website with static low-quality images; 2) website with multiple high-quality images. Static image with a low resolution (Park and Stoel, 2002) was used in Static Image condition. Multiple images of the product that permits exterior and interior examination by rotating and zooming were used in Advanced Presentation condition.

In a high trust advanced presentation condition users were able to manipulate the image and see the product from different angles. The website contained trust related features such as privacy notice, customer support, and Verisign logo that supported trust towards the website. In a low trust advanced presentation condition users were able to manipulate the image and to see the product from different angles; however, the website lacked trust features. In a high trust static image condition users were able to see a single static picture of the product and the website containing trust features. In a low trust static image condition users were able to see a single static picture and the website with no trust features. (Fig. 2)
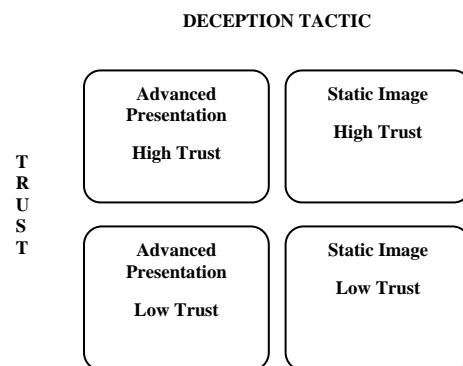
DECEPTION TACTIC

T **R** **U** **S** **T**	**Advanced Presentation** **High Trust**	**Static Image** **High Trust**
	Advanced Presentation **Low Trust**	**Static Image** **Low Trust**

Fig. 2. Research Design

All product images depicted authentic items. Textual description of the product was provided adjacent to images. The product description included information about size, color and other product attributes. The descriptions were similar to standard product descriptions posted on online retail websites and were the same for all four conditions. The websites and instructions were pilot tested and refined prior to their administration for this study.

Participants were recruited from a large urban college in the Northeast of the U.S. and were randomly assigned to one of four established conditions and the corresponding experimental online stores. In order to establish a common task context, all participants were given a scenario where they had to evaluate a watch from the online store at the request of a friend, and make sure that the watch was authentic. To accomplish that task, the participants were asked 1) to evaluate the online store by examining store's images, policies, features and content; 2) to evaluate the product; 3) to make a recommendation for a friend; 4) to complete the questionnaire.

The participants were instructed to search for a particular watch - Porsche Design P'6610 Chronograph PAT. This watch was chosen for several reasons: 1) Unisex item: watch is considered a product that appeals to both genders and it has been

successfully used in online store experiments (Jiang and Benbasat, 2007; Kamis et al. 2008; Kim and Benbasat, 2003); 2) Product familiarity: pilot test demonstrated high familiarity with the brand and low familiarity with watch features; 3) Brand: designer brand products, accessories in particular, are known to be imitated by counterfeiters; 4) Price: the value of the purchase ($1100) justifies counterfeit concerns.

Measures used in the post-test questionnaire were adapted from existing seven-point scales for (a) perceived deception (Grazioli and Jarvenpaa, 2000); (b) trust towards the website (Jarvenpaa and Tractinsky, 1999). Control measures included buyer's trust propensity (Gefen et al. 2003); attitude to trusting web stores, attitude toward internet safety, attitude toward the web (Grazioli and Jarvenpaa, 2000); familiarity with the product and demographic information. The manipulation check was based on perceived website diagnosticity (Jiang and Benbasat, 2005; Kempf and Smith, 1998).

RESULTS

The sample used for this study consisted of 77 observations with 20, 20, 19 and 18 observations in each condition. Discriminant and convergent validity of the scales were initially established using a confirmatory factor analysis with a VARIMAX rotation. All items loaded positively on hypothesized research constructs and loaded negatively on other constructs, indicating both convergent and discriminant validity in the constructs. Two items with low loadings were dropped. The reliability of the constructs assessed with Cronbach's alpha indicates values of .927 and .91 for each scale. The factor loadings and Cronbach's alpha values of all constructs are displayed in Table 1.

Rotated Factor Matrix	*Factor*	
Construct	1	2
Perceived Deception: Cronbach's alpha = 0.927		
Accurate (Reversed)	**.610**	-.548
Misleading	**.820**	-.234
Truthful (Reversed)	**.677**	-.525
Deceptive	**.816**	-.304
Factual (Reversed)	**.723**	-.418
Distorted	**.766**	-.237
Trust towards the Website: Cronbach's alpha = 0.910		
This online store is trustworthy.	-.513	**.819**
This online store wants to be known as one who keeps promises and commitments.	-.174	**.671**
I trust this online store keeps my best interests in mind.	-.309	**.903**
This retailer has more to lose than to gain by not delivering on their promises- Dropped	-.134	.389
I find it necessary to be cautious with this online store (Reversed) - Dropped	-.269	.360
This online store's behavior meets my expectations.	-.376	**.714**

Table1. Factor Analysis of Survey Instruments

Hypotheses Testing

We first checked for potential differences among conditions in the control variables (gender, demographic variables, familiarity with the product, buyer's trust propensity, attitude to trusting web stores, attitude toward internet safety, and attitude toward the web). No significant differences were detected.

Hypotheses testing was conducted with an analysis of variance (ANOVA). We expected to find that advanced product presentation and the availability of trust features would lead to lower perception of counterfeit deception, whereas a static image and lack of trust features would have a stronger opposite effect.

Table 2 presents the ANOVA results for product presentation, website trust features and interaction effects. The results demonstrate the evidence of the product presentation effect (F=7.7, p=.007) meaning that participants in the advanced presentation condition are less likely to perceive counterfeit deception online and participants in a static image condition are

more likely to perceive counterfeit deception online (means 3.9 vs. 4.3, respectively). Therefore, H1 is supported. However, contrary to our expectations, the effect of website features on perceived deception is not significant (F=1.1, p=.296). Furthermore, results do not yield any significant interaction effect (F=.61, p=.805),

Source	*Type III SS*	*df*	*F*	*Sig.*	*Observed*
ProductPresentation	16.255	1	7.701	**.007**	.782
WebsiteFeatures	2.337	1	1.107	.296	.180
ProductPresentation* WebsiteFeatures	.129	1	.061	.805	.057
alpha = .05					

Table 2. ANOVA Results for Perceived Deception

To further investigate the effect of website trust features, we ran a manipulation check and found that there was no significant difference in perceived trust in low trust and high trust conditions (F=1.8, p=.19; marginal means 3.53 in high trust conditions and 3.08 in low trust conditions). Although the means are in the expected direction they are not statistically different from each other.

DISCUSSION

Our results indicate that advanced product presentation plays an important role in increasing the perception of authenticity of products among online consumers. As product presentation in online stores is a virtual representation, it may (or may not) correspond to the actual product. Advanced presentation that provides the ability to inspect exterior and interior characteristics of the product creates the perception that the product is authentic as it makes the look and feel of online products more complete. Therefore, advanced presentation is a very useful e-retailing strategy as it reduces the level of perceived deception. However, advanced product presentation can also create advantages for counterfeiters, when they use it to deceive potential customers. In this case, it is very important that consumers inspect not only the images of a product but also the overall website design and content as they may provide additional clues for deception detection.

Our experiment did not provide enough evidence of the effect of website trust features on perceived counterfeit deception although participants experienced different levels of trust associated with each of the websites. There are several possible explanations for the non-significant results. One of the possibilities is the inability of participants to recognize trust features due to the lack of knowledge in this area. Prior research based on consumer vulnerability to fraudulent websites suggests that even skilled internet users fail to detect fraudulent manipulations based on website trust features (Grazioli and Jarvenpaa, 2000). It is also possible that participants' lack of attention towards trust features and their concentration on product features might have affected their overall judgment. Another possible explanation could be website design. We used two versions of the same website in our experiment. The two versions were professionally built and resembled the majority of e-retailing websites found online: the first version of the website depicted trust features and the other did not. Had participants been exposed to more pronounced differences in website design, we could possibly find more significant differences in their responses. Based on these insights, we will improve the website trust manipulation in future research.

One limitation of this study is that participants did not purchase a watch for themselves using their own money. Should that be the case, the participants may demonstrate more motivation and interest in the task. However, the average amount of time spent on website evaluation and the results of the questionnaires suggest that participants spent significant time and effort performing the experimental task. Another limitation of this study is that only one category of products was used. Although watches have been used successfully in the evaluation of online products (Jiang and Benbasat, 2007; Kamis et al. 2008; Kim and Benbasat, 2003), the findings of this study may not be generalized easily to other types of products. Furthermore, the results of this study are likely to be relevant for the unknown category of websites as we deliberately used unfamiliar websites without established brand name recognition.

CONCLUSION

This study conceptualizes the nature and role of product information and seller information as a means for understanding the mechanisms of online counterfeit deception. Furthermore, this paper extends the theory of deception by applying the concept of fact misrepresentation to situations of counterfeit fraud in an online setting. The paper adds new knowledge to the study of online deception that has been clearly identified as a significant threat to Internet commerce (Grazioli and Jarvenpaa, 2000).

In addition, this paper exposes website design features that can be used by deceitful merchants to make users unknowingly purchase counterfeit products from online stores. The knowledge of these features can be used for further development of online stores and for educating online customers. This study can be helpful for academic research as an initial step in the exploration of deception mechanisms in online counterfeit markets and for practitioners including legitimate companies, website owners and anti-counterfeit organizations seeking to decrease the number of counterfeit sales online.

This study can lay the groundwork for the equally interesting research of deception in Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) dealings when sellers conduct dishonest business transactions through online auction sites. Further examination of counterfeit deception mechanisms can improve the effectiveness of available institutional methods of controlling counterfeit goods, provide a better explanation of trust in online storefronts, and enable the progress of online transactions in internet retail and e-commerce in general.

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