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International Marketing

The impact of website design features on the consumer's purchase decision

Verkkosivun ominaisuuksien vaikutus kuluttajan ostopäätökseen

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ABSTRACT

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This bachelor's thesis examines the impact of website design features on the consumer's purchase decision. The aim of the study is to find out which website design features build trust and thereby influence purchase decision. By examining the purchase process and how the purchase decision is made, we construct a theoretical background for this study.

The study is conducted by a qualitative research and the method of collecting data is a semi-structured interview. Nine participants between the age of 20 and 38 were interviewed. The interviewees were asked to examine and evaluate seven different online stores, that sell houseplants.

The results of this study show that the website design features have a significant importance on the consumer's perception of the website's trustworthiness and thereby the willingness to purchase. However, the importance of the website design is less significant if the online vendor is already familiar to the consumer. According to this study, trustworthy websites are visually pleasing, have good product pictures, are easy to use and have essential information easily accessible. Visual appeal or ease of use alone do not increase trust remarkably. Lack of ease in finding the essential information decreased trust significantly.

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Tämä kandidaatintutkielma tutkii verkkosivujen ominaisuuksien vaikutusta ostopäätökseen. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää, mitkä verkkosivujen ominaisuudet vaikuttavat luottamukseen ja sitä kautta ostopäätökseen. Tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys on muodostettu tutkimalla ostoprosessia ja ostopäätöksen muodostumista.

Tutkielma on tehty laadullisena tutkimuksena ja aineisto on kerätty puolistrukturoidulla haastattelulla. Yhdeksän 20–38 -vuotiasta osallistui haastatteluun. Haastateltavia pyydettiin tarkastelemaan ja vertailemaan seitsemää erilaista verkkokauppaa, jotka myyvät huonekasveja.

Tutkielmasta käy ilmi, että verkkosivujen ominaisuuksilla on merkittävä vaikutus kuluttajan ostopäätökseen ja luottamukseen kyseistä verkkokauppaa kohtaan. Toisaalta verkkosivujen ominaisuuksien merkitys on pienempi, jos verkkokauppa on ennestään tuttu. Tämän tutkimuksen mukaan luotettavat verkkokaupat ovat visuaalisesti miellyttäviä, helppoja käyttää ja tarvittava tieto on helposti saatavilla. Verkkokaupan ulkonäkö tai helppokäyttöisyys ei yksinään vaikuta luottamukseen merkittävästi. Tarvittavan tiedon löydettävyyden vaikeus vähentää luottamusta merkittävästi.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digitalization is a major change that retail companies have encountered. Selling products online is not a new concept, but the significance of it has recently increased (Hagberg, Sundstrom & Egels-Zandén 2016). Digitalization has induced a huge growth in commercial websites. However, despite the rapid growth of e-commerce, retailers still struggle with the low conversion rates. Nearly 96 % of the website visitors leave without making a purchase. (McDowell, Wilson & Kile 2016) Most consumers use retailers' websites to collect product information, but only a few of them make the actual purchase (Chau, Hu, Lee & Au 2007). This indicates that e-commerce has elements that restrain customers from buying products online. There are many websites that provide similar products, functions and information, which has intensified the competition for online customers (Deng & Poole 2012). Therefore, it is essential to stand out from the competition and improve the company's web presence.

This thesis focuses on examining houseplant e-commerce and the impact of the website design on customer's emotions and decisions. The website design influences converting e-commerce visitors into purchasers (McDowell et al. 2016). Consequently, online retail websites need to put an emphasis on the website design.

There is a lot of research about how website features affect customers' emotions and decisions. There is research about the effect of layout (Manganari, Siomkos, Rigopoulou & Vrechopoulos 2011; Doukins, O'Keefe, Siomkos & Vrechopoulos 2004), color (Hall & Hanna 2004; Cyr, Head & Larios 2010), usability (Belanche, Casalo & Guinaliu 2012; Flavian, Guinaliu & Gurrea 2006) and product images (Di, Sundaresan, Piramuthu & Bhardwaj 2014) on consumer behavior. Pengnate and Sarathy (2017) have proven that website design features can evoke website trust. Trust affects the purchase decision through perceived risk (Kim, Ferrin & Rao 2008), which is affected by product category (Bhatnagar, Misra & Rao 2000; Tractinsky & Lowengart 2001). In the case of houseplant e-commerce, the trust might play a much bigger role as the delivery contains many risks. The delivery might be delayed, and this can cause the plant to arrive damaged or even dead. As plants need water and sunlight to survive, they cannot be in the package for a long period of time. Also, during the winter season the cold

weather might damage the plant if it is not properly protected. According to Tractinsky and Lowengart (2001) more elements of the online store are considered when consumer purchases high-risk goods. However, there is no research about what website design elements exactly are important, when purchasing high-risk products. It is possible that the consumer pays attention to different details due to the perceived risk. Therefore, we need further investigation on how website design affects the trust and thereby the purchase decision.

1.1 Research objectives and questions

As previously mentioned, the aim of this bachelor's thesis is to investigate, what website design features affect the customer's purchase decision. The main research question of the study is:

How website design features affect the purchase process?

Sub-research questions will help examine the purchase process more thoroughly. To make a purchase, the consumer must trust the website in question. In the first sub-research question we focus on examining how trust is built with the website design. The second sub-research question focuses on examining the website design's effect on the purchase decision. The sub-research questions of the study are:

Which website design features influence trust in unfamiliar online vendors?

Which website design features influence conversion rate?

1.2 Research methodology used in this study

This study is conducted by a qualitative research. The qualitative research consists of a wide variety of approaches and methods, which can be used to describe the real-life phenomenon (Saldaña 2011, 3; Hirsijärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2000, 152). The qualitative research is used to study subjects that are hard to quantify, such as understanding processes, experiences and human behavior (Asper & Corte 2019). Hence qualitative research is a suitable method for studying purchase process.

In this thesis, the method of collecting data is a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview allows participants to answer questions in their own words and explain their

point of view more thoroughly (Koskinen, Alasuutari & Peltonen 2005, 104). Interviewing participants is a good research method, as getting to know individuals' viewpoints will best answer the research questions of this thesis.

1.4 Theoretical framework of this study

The theoretical framework of this study consists of literature and previous research on the impact of website design. The aim of the study is to understand how website design features affect the purchase decision in houseplant e-commerce. To understand the purchase decisions, we need to examine the different stages of the purchase process.

The act of making a purchase decision consists of three stages: need recognition, prepurchase search and evaluation of alternatives (Schiffman, Kanuk & Wisenblit 2010). In e-commerce the website design is a way to stand out from the alternatives. According to Kim et al. (2008) consumer's trust affects purchasing decision in two ways: indirectly, through perceived risk, and directly. A consumer's trust has a direct positive effect on the purchasing decision and a negative effect on the perceived risk (Kim et al. 2008). The perceived risk is affected by the product category (Bhatnagar, Misra & Rao 2000; Tractinsky & Lowengart 2001). Pengnate and Sarathy (2017) demonstrated that website design features, such as the visual appeal and the ease of use, affect the consumer's trust with unfamiliar online vendors. These findings provide a theoretical framework for this study (Figure 1).

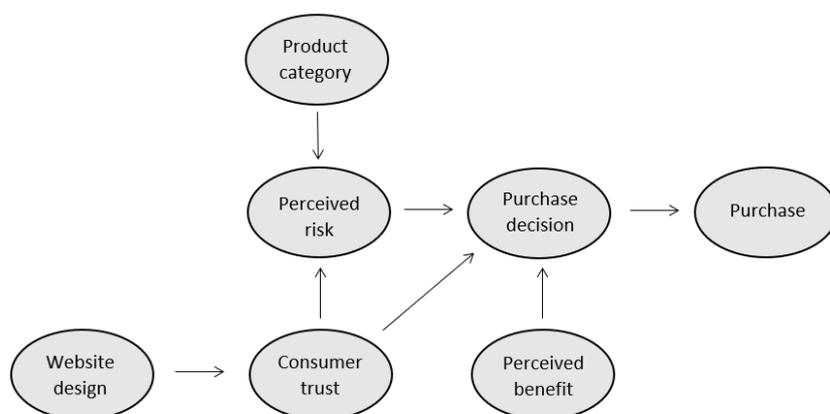


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

1.5 Defining key concepts

In this chapter, we will define the key concepts of this study. It is essential to define these concepts, as some of them have various definitions and some might be uncommon. The following definitions are used in this study.

1.5.1 Website design features

Website design features are all the visual and usability related elements of the website (Garett, Chiu, Zhang & Young 2016). Usability is defined by how easily a visitor can navigate through a website (Flavian, Guinaliu & Gurrea 2006). The website flow is measured by how enjoyable it is to move between activities on the website (Hoffman & Novak 1996). Visual elements of the website are images, color schemes, fonts, layout, overall visual attractiveness and logos (Garett et al. 2016). Also, the aesthetic of the website can be described using concepts of website complexity and order. Website complexity is defined by a number of different elements: words, links and graphics on the webpage. Whereas website order is the relationship between these different elements. (Deng & Poole 2012)

1.5.2 Purchase process

The purchase process helps to explain and predict consumer behavior, and thereby helps making marketing decisions. The consumer goes through 5 different stages when purchasing a product. These stages are problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase behavior. (Butler & Peppard 1998)

1.5.3 Purchase decision

Purchase decision is a response to a problem (Prasad & Jha 2014; Solomon 2011, 332). The effort we put into solving the problem differs, as some purchase decisions are more important than others. Some decisions are almost automatic and some require acquiring a lot of information. (Solomon 2011, 332)

1.5.4 Experiential and utilitarian shopping behavior

Experiential shopping behavior is defined by browsing online stores without searching for any specific product. Whereas, in utilitarian shopping behavior consumer searches for specific products or information. (Fiore & Kim 2007)

1.5.5 Functional and motivational factors

Functional factors are attributes that construct the basic functionality of the website. They are essential elements for a website to function properly. Whereas motivational factors are elements that fulfil visitors' needs beyond basic functionality. (Ou & Sia 2010)

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several studies have examined the impact of website design features on customer's emotions and decisions. In this section, the literature on the purchase behavior and the purchase process is going to be reviewed more thoroughly. Also, this chapter defines the concept of the website design through literature and introduces previous research on influence of the website features on customers' emotions and decisions. This will serve as a theoretical framework for this thesis.

2.1 Purchase process

The purchase process consists of 5 stages: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase behavior (Figure 2). The purchase process begins with the problem recognition. The consumer becomes aware of the problem when he or she wants to fill the gap between the actual state and the desired state. The consumer might want to replace the product he or she already owns or purchase something new. After the problem recognition stage motivates to act, the consumer starts searching for information. The consumer might have information from past experiences. Otherwise, the consumer must take action to gain knowledge. The retailer must provide all the essential information. However, if the consumer receives too much information, the consumers' sense of uncertainty might increase. After gaining information, the consumer starts to evaluate alternatives. Past experiences, branding, marketing and word-of-mouth provide the information

needed to make a choice between the alternatives. At the purchase stage, the consumer makes the actual decision to make the purchase. (Butler & Peppard 1998; Schiffman, Kanuk & Wisenblit 2010, 484-485) There are three types of behavior when making a purchase decision: routine response behavior, limited problem solving and extensive problem solving. Routine response behavior requires the least effort and information search. On the contrary, extensive problem solving requires the most effort. Routine response behavior occurs when purchasing frequently familiar low-cost products. Limited problem solving requires some effort, but the consumer is not that motivated to rigorously evaluate alternatives. (Solomon 2011, 334-335) The last stage of the purchase process is post-purchase behavior. The product might match the expectations, exceed expectations or disappoint. Depending on consumers' satisfaction, the consumer might purchase the product again or switch the brand. (Schiffman et al. 2010, 498) Retailers should collect suggestions and complaints from their customers, as the feedback is critical to understanding consumer behavior (Butler & Peppard 1998).



Figure 2. Purchase process

2.2 Effect of trust on purchase decision

Trust and perceived risk have a significant effect on the purchase process. Reputation, privacy concerns, security concerns and information quality of the online retail store affect customers' trust. The sense of risk is much higher online when compared to shopping at brick-and-mortar stores. In the traditional store, the customer can touch and feel the product, which decreases the amount of perceived risk. (Kim et al. 2008) There are two predominant types of risks: financial risk and product category risk. Financial risk is not associated with a particular product, but rather with online shopping as a purchasing medium. Many consumers hesitate to provide credit card information online. Greater knowledge decreases the perception of financial risk. Product category risk is associated with a particular product. The risk is higher when the product is technologically complex and has a high price. (Bhatnagar et al. 2000) The consumer takes

into consideration more elements of the website, when purchasing high-risk goods, compared to low risk-goods. Purchasing high-risk goods involve considerations of the shopping process, the provided information and the price. When purchasing low-risk products, consumers were most interested in the price. In this case, additional information does not provide additional benefit and it might even lead to a negative effect on the probability of choosing a retailer. (Tractinsky & Lowengart 2001)

The main concern of online retailers is the low conversion rate (McDowell et al. 2016; Chau et al. 2007). Therefore, it is critical to understand what leads to consumers' dropout decision. Chau et al. (2007) examined how customers' trust affects their decisions to exit from the vendor's website in each stage of the purchase process. Trust is not a significant hindrance in the early stages of the purchase process in comparison to later stages. Consumers perceived benefit is much higher than the perceived risk when searching and comparing product information. Structural assurance significantly increases trust in the alternative evaluation stage. Structural assurance makes the consumer feel that the websites' technological structure for online transaction is secure and reliable. Consumers value secure transactions, guarantees for refunds, third-party certificates and ratings. Also, ease of use affects the consumers' trust in this stage. In the purchase stage, the customer needs to provide personal data and information to the vendor. At this stage, it is important for the customer to feel that the vendor does not gain anything by being dishonest. Structural assurance continues to be still important, whereas ease of use has a less significant effect on trust at this stage. In conclusion, ease of use is important for building trust in the early stages of the purchase process. In the later stages, transaction related elements have more significant importance. (Chau et al. 2007)

2.3 Website design features

Key design elements for user engagement are navigation, graphical representation, organization, content utility, purpose, simplicity and readability. In this thesis, we will focus on examining navigation and graphical representation. Effective navigation consists of the presence of visible and consistent navigation bar, search features and easy access to information. Images,

color schemes, fonts, layout, visual attractiveness and logos construct the graphical representation of a website. (Garett et al. 2016)

The color choice of a website has great importance. Reading a text on a monitor is more difficult than it is on paper. The color scheme of the website can either improve readability or make it worse. There are some color combinations that are hard for the eye to process. Some color contrast combinations make the text very difficult to read. The easiest color combination to read is black text on a white background, but it is not the best option for website design as it is not visually appealing. When designing a website, a general rule is to choose one primary color and one or two complementary colors. The website might look chaotic if too many colors are used. (Best 2017, 620-621) Chromatic colors are best for website design, as these colors make the site visually more pleasing and increase the conversion rate (Hall & Hanna, 2004). The color scheme should be simple, in harmony and related to the company involved. The colors of the website should match with the company's logo and brand. All of the company's marketing material should have a common theme and color scheme. (Best 2017, 621)

A typical webpage layout consists of a header or a banner, the main content, a navigation bar or a menu, sometimes a sidebar in the right side column and a footer. The navigation bar has typically two placement options, either horizontally under the header or vertically in the left column. The main content is in the centre of the website. (Pipes 2011, 61) Also, some websites contain sliders and call-to-action buttons. Sliders are used to display images like a slideshow. Call-to-action or "CTA" are buttons that request visitors to do something, for example to subscribe to the newsletter. (Brinker 2020)

The perceived ease of use of the website layout affects consumers' pleasure and attitude towards the website (Manganari et al. 2011). There are three main types of website layouts: the grid layout, the freeform layout and the racetrack layout. In the grid layout customers navigate the e-commerce website through a hierarchical order. To find the desired product, the customer must search it from product categories and sub-categories. This type of layout pattern is best for planned purchases. The freeform layout pattern allows the customer to freely move in any direction. To reach the desired product, the customer must use a search engine or select any of the items that are directly displayed on the page. This type of layout increases the time

spent on the website. It is more appropriate for browsing and impulsive purchases. The race-track layout uses two corridors on each web page. The customer is guided to navigate through certain paths to find the desired product. This type of layout has direct access only to neighboring categories. (Doukidis et al. 2004; Manganari et al. 2011)

According to Manganari et al. (2011) there is no noteworthy difference between the freeform layout and the grid layout in perceived ease of use. However, the freeform layout pattern is significantly more preferred than the grid layout pattern. The layout pattern influences perceived pleasure, which affects positively consumers' satisfaction with the website. (Manganari et al. 2011) Cyr et al. (2010) have proven that consumers' satisfaction affects positively e-loyalty. In conclusion, we may state that the layout is an important aspect of website design as it influences e-loyalty.

Deng and Poole (2012) studied two aesthetic website design factors, complexity and order. Also, the role of the customer's motivational orientation on the preference for aesthetic features was investigated. Website complexity is measured by the number of words, graphics, links and elements on the webpage. Webpage order is defined as the relationship between different elements of the webpage. The webpage has a high order, if its elements are logically arranged, unrelated elements are visually separated and similar elements are visually associated. The webpage is perceived to be low of order if the webpage has the freeform layout and the elements are randomly arranged. The results of this study show that increasing the webpage order can improve preference towards the website when combined with high complexity. The effect of the order was insignificant when combined with low complexity. The webpage complexity was found to yield its effect on user preference, only when combined with high order. (Deng & Poole 2012)

Motivational orientation occurs in two different online shopping behaviors: experiential and utilitarian. Experiential shopping behavior is defined as non-directed browsing, without any specific goals. Whereas in utilitarian shopping behavior customer has a defined goal, for example search for a specific product or information. (Deng & Poole 2012; Fiore & Kim 2007) In the experiential shopping experience, the highest level of complexity was most preferred.

While, in the utilitarian shopping experience, the moderate level of complexity was most preferred. However, the motivational orientation did not affect the preference for webpage order. (Deng & Poole 2012) Consequently, in addition to layout patterns, we need to take into consideration the combination of webpage order and complexity.

In online retail websites, the information is accessible in visual form, verbal form, or usually as a combination of both. Visual and verbal information are fundamental elements in e-commerce as the customer cannot physically examine the product. (Kim & Lennon 2008) Both visual and verbal forms of information have a noteworthy effect on customers' attitude towards product (Kim & Lennon 2008; Schlosser 2003). However, studies have contradictory results on how visual and verbal information affects the purchase intention. Schlosser (2003) suggests that visual information plays a more important role in customers' purchase intention than verbal information. Whereas Kim and Lennon (2008) propose that only verbal information plays prominent role on the purchase intention.

According to Di et al. (2014) images significantly increase customers' attention, trust and conversion rate. Increasing number of images of the product increases the conversion rate, as it creates a more thorough visual representation of the product. The conversion rate is nearly doubled when using two product pictures in comparison to using only one. However, using more than three pictures have a less significant effect on the conversion rate. Also, the study revealed that the number and the quality of pictures have more significant influence on purchasing apparel products as compared to electronics. The apparel products rely more on their visual, whereas electronics rely more on their specifications and functionality. The image quality is an important element for goods, that rely on visual appearance. Clarity of the foreground object, strong contrast between foreground and background, high brightness and uncluttered background are elements of a high-quality picture. Bad lighting, cluttered background, blur and bad composition are common low-quality picture problems. (Di et al., 2014) Houseplants rely on their visual appeal rather than functionality, so we can conclude that image related variables influence purchasing houseplants online.

In addition to the graphical representation of the website, retailers should also focus on building easy-to-use websites (Belanche et al. 2012). Time duration spend on the website, the efficiency of the search engine, the efficient navigation patterns and the repeat visits are elements that measure the effectiveness of the website. Flow affects all these elements. (Hoffman & Novak 1996) Flow is defined as a pleasant way to move between structured activities on the website. Fast loading times and effective navigation improve the flow experience. (Hoffman & Novak 1996; Richard & Chandra 2005) Another very similar concept is the usability of the website. Usability is the ease of understanding the structure of the website, simplicity of use of the website and the ease of achieving a desired result. Usability is positively related to the consumer trust and satisfaction. Satisfaction in turn affects intention to use the website (Flavian et al. 2006; Belanche et al. 2012) Consumers have various skill levels when it comes to controlling a website, therefore they may perceive different levels of risk. When consumer perceives a great risk, the role of usability becomes more important. Usability helps to reduce the perceived risk and form a more positive perception of the website. (Belanche et al. 2012)

2.4 The effect of website features on decisions

Most of the website visitors do not convert to customers (McDowell et al. 2016; Chau et al. 2007). Therefore, online retailers should seek ways to increase customer engagement. A study conducted by Mc Dowell et al. (2016) indicates that website design features have an impact on the conversion rate. The results of the study show that it is important to engage with a potential customer at an early stage. Recommending products to customer increases interactivity and customer engagement. Also having a prominent shopping cart icon is associated with a higher conversion rate. However, the most important elements that have a positive effect on the conversion rate are instantaneous pricing, providing free shipping, handling charges effectively and offering related products. Requiring an email address for checkout had a significant negative effect on the conversion rate. Websites that have the highest conversion rates tend to have flow-enhancing features. (McDowell et al. 2016) Long downloading times, failure of navigation links and need to complete long forms inhibit the flow experience of a visitor (Richard & Chandra 2005). The interactivity of the website improves the flow and with it increases conversion rate (McDowell et al. 2016; Richard & Chandra 2005).

As previously mentioned, Kim et al. (2008) showed that consumer's trust affects their purchase decision. In turn, Pengnate and Sarathy (2017) prove that website design features influence trust. Therefore, we may state that website design features influence customers purchase decision. The study conducted by Pengnate and Sarathy (2017) revealed that visual appeal of the website has a more significant influence on consumers' trust than ease of use. Amongst the male participants, both visual appeal and ease of use are important factors on developing trust. Whereas visual appeal was a more important factor among the female participants. The study also found that visual appeal influences ease of use. (Pengnate & Sarathy 2017)

Even though people's attitudes towards an online vendor are usually more trusting than suspicious, distrust is still often present. Perceived website functionality is an adequate predictor of distrust. If a website does not function properly and does not have all the essential properties, the vendor will have difficulties to maintain trust and prevent distrust. Functionality factors prevent distrust, whereas motivational factors help to build trust. Functional factors are essential attributes of the website, that provide basic functionality. Motivational factors are those attributes that fulfil needs beyond basic functionality. (Ou & Sia 2010) This indicates that retailers should not only focus on building trust, but also on preventing distrust.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The houseplant e-commerce was chosen for this study, as houseplant online stores are unfamiliar for most participants. Hence, participants do not have any preconceptions about the websites and can focus on website design and its effect on their conception of the website. As mentioned before, previous studies have examined the effect of website design on consumer's trust and purchase decision. However, buying plants online may have higher risk compared to many other products. If the delivery delays, the plant might die, as it does not get enough water and sunlight. Also, during the winter season the plant may be damaged because of cold weather, if it is not properly protected for delivery. The consumer pays more attention to the website design, when purchasing high-risk products (Tractinsky & Lowengart 2001). Therefore, the consumer might pay attention to different details when purchasing a plant, compared to many other products.

3.1 Background of research

This study is conducted by using a qualitative research method. This was a suitable method for this study, as qualitative research is used to describe a real-life phenomenon (Saldaña 2011). The data was gathered with a semi-structured interview. This allowed participants to explain their point of view more thoroughly. It was important to get a good understanding of the participants' viewpoints in order to answer the research questions of this thesis.

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Browsing online stores	Purchasing from online stores
1	female	20	Weekly	Every 3-4 months
2	female	20	Weekly	Monthly
3	female	21	Weekly	Monthly
4	female	23	Daily	Monthly
5	female	24	Weekly	Every 2-3 months
6	male	24	Monthly	1-2 times a year
7	female	27	Weekly	Monthly
8	female	30	Daily	Almost weekly
9	male	38	Weekly	Rarely

Table 1. Interviewees

Nine people aged between 20 and 38 were selected to participate in this study. This group was selected as over 90 % of the people between the age of 16-44 shop online (Statista 2020). Both men and women were selected for this study. Most of the interviewees browse online stores weekly. However, they make a purchase more rarely.

Participants were asked to examine and compare seven different websites, that sell houseplants. First, the interviewees were asked about their attitude towards purchasing houseplants online. Most interviewees would hesitate to buy plants online, as they considered it

risky or would prefer to see the plant in person before purchasing. However, some would consider buying a plant online if they will get a refund in case the plant arrives dead.

"I would hesitate to buy a plant online, as the plant might arrive damaged. However, I would consider buying if the company would refund the damaged product."

After inquiring about their online shopping habits and attitude towards purchasing plants online, the interviewees were asked about the websites that they examined. The interviewees were asked to choose which website was visually most and least pleasing, had best and worst product pictures, was easiest and hardest to use and was trustworthy and untrustworthy. Finally, the interviewees were inquired about which website was overall most pleasing and where they would make a purchase. The interviewees were also asked to justify their opinion.

3.2 Online stores used in research

The aim is to keep the online stores, that were used in the research, anonymous. We will focus only on the visual and usability related aspects of the online stores. To keep the online stores anonymous, the logos of the stores will be covered in the pictures. Also, online stores will be named website A, website B, etc.

Websites C and D were more simple and minimal compared to the other websites (Image 1). In contrast to the other websites, they did not recommend any products and had no CTAs. Home pages of these websites contain only one picture and a navigation menu with 3-4 links. At the bottom of the page, you can find contact information. Website D did not have a search bar or shopping cart icon visible. These websites have very low complexity as they contain only few elements. Websites F and G have very high complexity (Image 2). They have many elements and even two navigation bars, while all the other websites have only one. All the websites had contact information at the bottom of the page. Websites B, E and G had also displayed payment options. Websites C and F did not have links to social media (Table 2).

	CTA-button	recommended products	sliders	high complexity	low complexity	payment options displayed	search bar	shopping cart icon	grid layout pattern	2 navigation bars	links to social media
website A	X	X	X				X	X			X
website B	X	X	X			X	X	X			X
website C					X		X	X	X		
website D					X				X		X
website E	X	X				X	X	X			X
website F	X	X		X			X	X		X	
website G	X	X		X		X	X	X		X	X

Table 2. Elements of websites

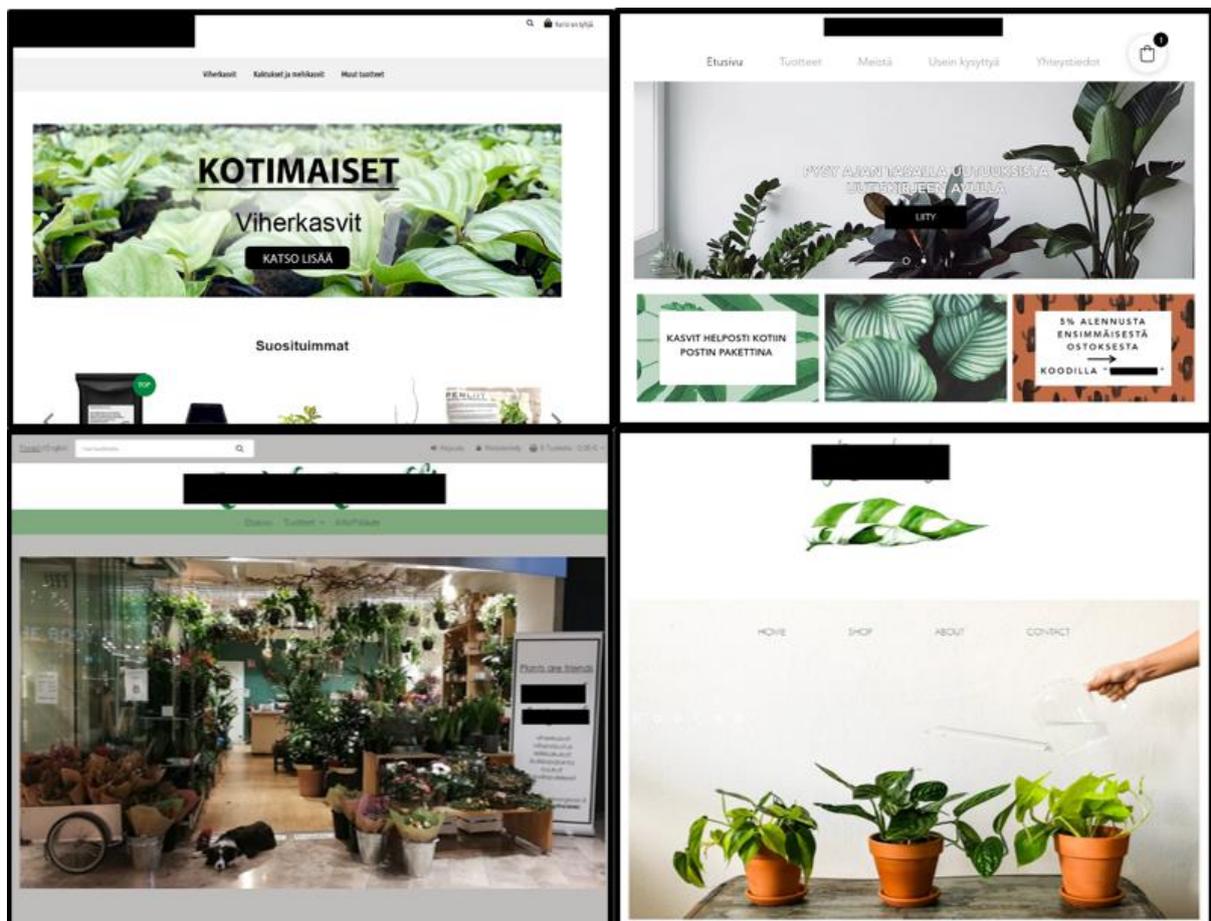


Image 1. Websites A and B at top. Websites C and D at bottom.

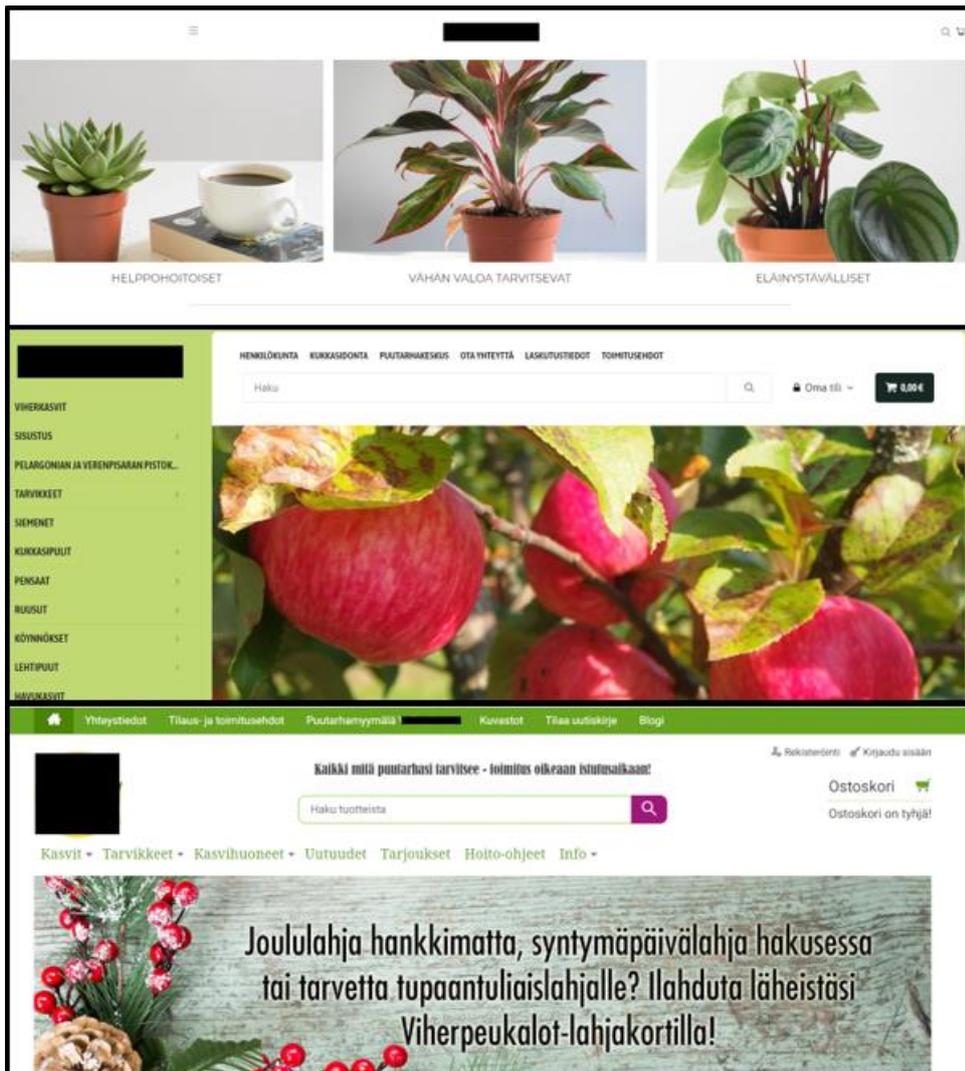


Image 2. From top to bottom: Website E, F and G.

4. RESULTS

As previously mentioned, the interviewees were inquired to browse through given websites and to pay attention to specific details. The interviewees agreed with certain aspects, however with other topics there was more dispersion.

4.1 Visuality

When describing the most visually pleasing websites, the interviewees focused more on product pictures and the overall attractiveness of the website. Small details like layout and text

fonts did not draw attention unless they were remarkably unpleasant. Websites B, D and E were considered visually most pleasing. However, despite the significant popularity of Website E, two interviewees did not like it. According to them, website E was too widely spread and did not have any blank space on the sides. The interviewees preferred bright, simple and modern websites with white backgrounds. Website B and E were considered as modern websites. Even though the interviewees preferred simple websites, website D was considered too simple. However, despite the unpleasantly low complexity of website D, it was still considered visually pleasing. Also, the interviewees paid attention to the product pictures. When describing the websites they preferred many mentioned that the websites had good product pictures. Visually least preferred websites were websites C and F. Website F was described as old-fashioned and outdated. Many disliked the green color of website F. While some liked the picture on the front page of website C, overall most did not like the website. Many pointed out that websites C and F had very bad product pictures.

“The best websites were modern with harmonious color scheme.”

Websites D and E had the most preferred product pictures (Image 3). Also, many liked pictures of websites A and B. The interviewees appreciated big and clear product pictures, which have consistent style and quality. It was considered important that you get an accurate understanding of the size of the plant. The bright lighting, uncluttered and white background was appreciated. According to Di et al. (2014), these are the elements of a high-quality picture. Di et. al (2014) also mentioned that using 2-3 pictures increases the conversion rate. The interviewees did not point out their preference for the number of pictures. However, websites D and E had 2-3 pictures per one type of plant. An increasing number of product images creates a more thorough visual representation of the plant. This might partly explain, why pictures of those websites were preferred.

Websites C and F had the least preferred product pictures (Image 4). The interviewees did not like that the images were cropped poorly and the plant was not fully displayed in the picture. The pictures were not consistent and they had different backgrounds. Website C had really small pictures and the background was quite dark, which was disliked. The interviewees also mentioned that these pictures had bad lighting and quality. Also, a few did not like the fact

that in some pictures there was a hand holding the plant. The interviewees strongly agreed on the websites that had bad product pictures.

“I liked the product pictures that give a good understanding of the size of the plant.”

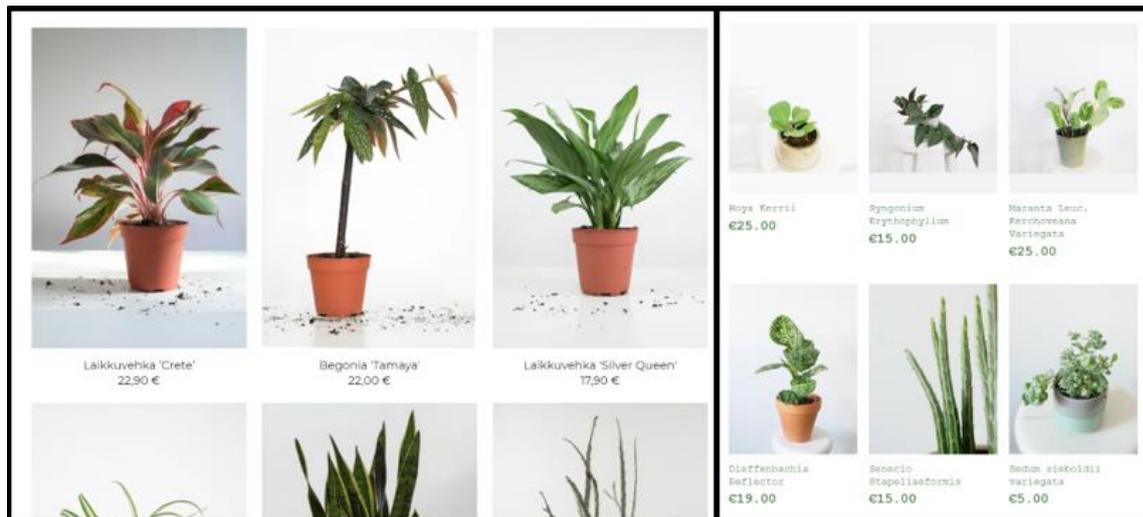


Image 3. Product pictures of websites D and E

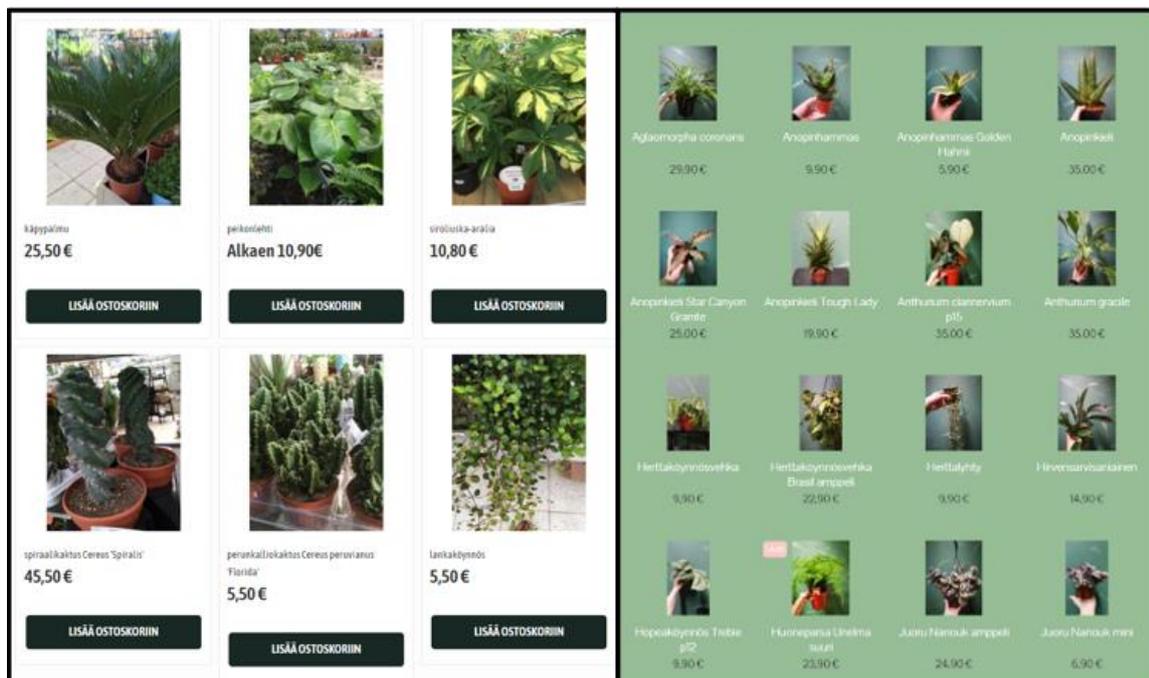


Image 4. Product pictures of websites F and C

Those websites, which had the best product pictures, are the ones that were considered visually attractive. Similarly, websites with bad product pictures were overall unattractive. However, many liked the product pictures of website D, but they did not prefer the website itself, as it was too simple. Product pictures play a huge role when estimating visuality. The interviewees did not mention their preference in layout patterns or a combination of visual and verbal information. However, these elements may still affect their opinion on a subconscious level. Therefore, it seems that small elements are not that significant to the customer, as long as overall attractiveness and product pictures are good. Thus, businesses should focus on building modern, bright and simple websites.

4.2 Usability and ease of finding information

The interviewees did not have strong opinions about the usability of the websites. It seems like, it was easier to pay attention to visual elements of the website in comparison to usability related elements. Many mentioned that all websites are relatively easy to use. Some interviewees mentioned that visually pleasing websites are easy to use, but there does not seem to be a strong correlation between visual attractiveness and usability of the website. Website D was considered attractive, but it was unpleasant to use. Most agreed that it was very hard to find information, from website D. For example, many did not find the delivery information or shopping cart icon. In order to find a shopping cart or search bar icon, you needed to go to the bottom of the product page, whereas other websites had the icons at the top corner of the front page. The fonts of website D are extraordinary and have a low contrast (Image 5), which made the readability poor. These factors decrease the usability of the website. Even though website F was considered unattractive, a few mentioned that it was quite easy to use. In conclusion, visual elements affect usability to some extent, but visuality does not alone affect the perceived ease of use. The location of links and icons has a significant effect on usability.

“All the websites were clear and relatively easy to use.”

- Price
All the listed prices included 24% VAT.
- Shipping
We can ship to EU
The order is dispatched on Mondays and Tuesdays.
- Cancel orders
Customers have a right to cancel their orders in 24 hours by email.
- Refund & Return
In case the product gets damaged, customers can inform us by email or contact form, we will handle the situation as soon as possible.
Products can not be returned.

Image 5. Font of the website D.

Also, the lack of product categories was considered unpleasant. Websites B and D did not have any product categories, all the houseplants and supplies were displayed on the same page. Many favored the product categories of website E. Website E categorized plants by size and other qualities like easy to take care of and safe for animals. One interviewee noted that website A used Latin names of plant species for product categories. This makes seeking certain products harder for some customers. Websites F and G have a large selection of different products. This made it hard to navigate through the website for some people. However, despite many links and product categories, most did not have problems navigating through websites F and G. This is explained in the study conducted by Deng and Poole (2012). The high complexity of the website requires high order (Deng & Poole, 2012). Therefore, the links and product categories of websites F and G must be logically arranged, as they were relatively easy to use for most people.

To sum up, visibility has some effect on usability, but the location of the links, the product categories and the relationship between different elements of the website have a more significant role on the ease of use. Visual elements like low contrast of icons can make it harder to find them. Low contrast between text and background and inconvenient font can decrease readability. This can make use of a website unpleasant. The interviewees also found it good when the link to the pages with more information were visible and located at the top of the page. Some found it annoying to scroll down the page to find links to relevant information. All the other websites had care instructions for the plants, except websites C and D. Many con-

sidered care instructions as important information in houseplant e-commerce. One interviewee mentioned that website E had the best care instructions. Also, one interviewee pointed out that websites A and D had sold-out products in between all the other products, which made use of the website unpleasant.

“It would be better if sold-out products were at the bottom of the page and clearly separated from other products.”

4.3 Effect of visuality and usability on trust and purchase process

The aim was to choose unfamiliar online vendors so that the interviewees would not have any preconceptions that would affect their opinion and therefore they could form their opinions strictly based on the elements of the website. However, 4 interviewees knew website G and one knew website A. Clearly, this affected the results. Websites E and G were considered most trustable (Table 3). When inquiring about where the interviewees would buy plants, they chose those websites, which they considered trustworthy. Those who would purchase from website G were either already familiar with the website or considered the website utilitarian and pleasant to use. Website E was considered trustworthy because it was pleasant overall. The website was visually beautiful, had great product pictures, convenient product categories, was easy to use and all the essential information was easy to find. These were the reasons why many would purchase a plant from website E. When inquiring about which website was most pleasant, most chose website E (Table 3). Nobody considered website G as pleasant, but still some were willing to make a purchase there. Hence, we may conclude that great website design features are more important if the online vendor is unfamiliar.

“The most trustworthy websites were E and B based on their visual appeal. Website G was trustworthy, as it was already familiar. The untrustworthy website was D, as the font was extraordinary.”

The least trusted websites were websites C, D and F (Table 3). Many did not trust visually unattractive websites. Nonetheless, even though website D was attractive, most did not trust

it, as information was very hard to find and extraordinary font made the website look unprofessional. The lack of information decreased trust towards the website. Website F was not trusted because of the old-fashioned look which made it seem very outdated. In the delivery information it is also mentioned that you can pick up your package at Valintatalo or Siwa, even though those grocery stores do not exist anymore. This clearly indicates that the website F has not been updated properly in many years, which decreases trust towards it. Websites that are visually unattractive and have bad product pictures make the website look unprofessional and untrustworthy. The interviewees also mentioned that they liked if acceptable payment methods were clearly presented and if information about delivery and return policy was easy to find.

	visually good	visually bad	good product pictures	bad product pictures	easy to use	hard to use	easy to find information	hard to find information	trustworthy	untrustworthy	pleasant websites	I would purchase from here
website A	1		4	1	4	2	3		2		2	2
website B	5		4		1	3	1		3		2	1
website C	2	4		6		1	1	1		3		1
website D	4		5		1	3		6		4	1	
website E	6	2	6		5		1	1	5	1	6	6
website F		5		8	3		2		1	3	1	
website G		2	1		1	4	2	1	5			4

Table 3. The results of the study

The results of the study are shown in Table 3. The number refers to how many times the website was mentioned in a particular context. For example, 8 interviewees said that website F has bad product pictures and 6 interviewees said that they would purchase a plant from website E.

In conclusion, the interviewees mainly agreed about which websites were visually attractive and had the best product pictures. Clearly, it was harder to evaluate the ease of use and ease of finding information. The interviewees also strongly agreed on which of the websites were most pleasant and where they would purchase a houseplant. Website E was the most preferred website. Six out of nine interviewees would purchase a houseplant from website E. Many liked the website because it was visually pleasing, easy to use and had all the essential

information. Four people would purchase a product from website G, but this is partly explained by the fact that some were already familiar with the website. Website C and F looked unprofessional, which made them untrustworthy. Also, website F looked outdated, but it was relatively easy to use. Website D is visually pleasing and has great product pictures, but it was hard to navigate through the website. No one wanted to purchase a product from website D neither F. Hence, visual elements or navigation related elements alone do not seem to increase trust significantly. The website should be both visually attractive and easy to use to increase trust. Website A and B are considered fairly good, but not many chose to purchase a product from those websites, as there were better alternatives.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to examine the effect of the website design features on the purchase decision. The study was conducted by qualitative research. Data was collected by semi-structured interview. Nine participants between ages of 20 to 38 were selected for the interview. The participants were asked to examine and compare seven different online stores, that sold houseplants. Houseplant e-commerce was chosen for this study because none of the participants had bought a plant online and most websites were priorly unfamiliar to them. By using unfamiliar online vendors participants could focus strictly on website design, as they did not have any preconceptions about the vendor. Also, buying a plant online may involve more risks in relation to other products available to purchase online, which may affect the purchase intention.

Previous studies have proven that consumers' trust affects purchase decision (Kim et al. 2008; Chau et al. 2007). However, in the case of houseplant e-commerce, the purchase process requires more trust than usual. Most of the interviewees said that they would hesitate to buy a plant online, as they prefer to see a plant in real life and consider the delivery risky. They were concerned about whether the plant would be properly protected for delivery, the possible delay in delivery and whether the plant would arrive alive. When purchasing high-risk goods, the consumer takes more elements of the website into consideration (Tractinsky & Lowengart 2001). Nonetheless, there is no research about what website design elements affect purchase

decisions, when purchasing high-risk products. Therefore, the effect of website design features on trust and the purchase decision require further investigation.

The main research question is: “How website design features affect the purchase process?”. In the evaluation of alternatives stage of the purchase process, the consumer makes the decision where he/she is going to purchase the product. Usually, the choice between alternatives is made based on past experiences, branding, marketing and word-of-mouth. (Butler & Peppard 1998; Schiffman et al. 2010) In the case of e-commerce and unfamiliar online vendors, the website design and how your website operates makes you stand out from alternatives. Trust affects purchase decision especially at later stages of the purchase process (Chau et al. 2007). As buying house plants online is considered to be risky, it is very important to make your website look trustworthy. The website design has a significant effect on consumer’s trust (Pengnate & Sarathy 2017), which affects purchase decision (Kim et al. 2008). The results of this research show the same. The interviewees would purchase a product from those websites, which they considered attractive, easy to use and found all the essential information easy to find. However, if they already were familiar with the website, the website design features were not considered as important as they trusted the website despite shortcomings in the website design.

To answer the main research question, we used two sub-research questions: “Which website design features influence trust in unfamiliar online vendors?” and “Which website design features influence conversion rate?”. The conversion in this case would be purchasing a product. According to McDowell et al. (2016) website design features affect conversion rate and according to Pengnate and Sarathy (2017) website design features have an impact on trust. As trust affects the purchase decision (Kim et al. 2008), which is the conversion in this case, we may conclude that the same website design features affect both trust and conversion rate. The results of this study show that the interviewees would purchase a product from those websites, which they considered trustworthy.

According to this study, modern, bright and simple websites were most preferred. However, too simple websites were considered unpleasant. This can be explained by examining layout

patterns. Manganari et al. (2011) have proven that the freeform layout pattern is more preferred than the grid layout pattern. Those websites that were considered too simple had the grid layout pattern, as there were no product recommendations on the front page. You needed to select a product category in order to reach the desired product. All the other websites had a combination of freeform and grid layout pattern. There were products displayed on the front page, but you could also seek products from product categories and sub-categories. The combination of both freeform and grid layout seemed to be more preferred. Lack of product categories was disliked. It was considered important that the website had logical product categories and that the desired products were easy to find. The modern websites were preferred, because the old-fashioned websites seemed outdated, which decreased the trust toward them. Also, it was considered important that all the information is up to date.

The interviewees were experiential shoppers as they did not search for any specific product. Deng and Poole (2012) claim that experiential shoppers prefer the highest level of complexity and utilitarian shoppers a moderate level of complexity. These results do not correspond to the results of this study. In this study, the interviewees preferred a moderate level of complexity, even though the interviewees were experiential shoppers. Presumably, the website order and complexity are not significant website design elements and shoppers do not pay significant attention to them.

The product pictures were considered the most important visual element. The most preferred product pictures had good quality, bright lighting, were uncluttered and had a light background. It was considered important that the product pictures are consistent and have a similar background. Bad product pictures made the website look unprofessional, which decreased trust toward the website. Inconsistent pictures, bad lighting and dark background were considered bad. Also, the interviewees did not like if there was a hand holding a plant or the size of the plant remained unclear. The pictures where the whole plant was displayed were preferred, as it gives a clear understanding about the size of the plant. The websites with the most preferred product pictures had 2-3 pictures per one type of plant. The interviewees did not mention their preference for the number of pictures, but it may have affected their decision unconsciously. According to Di et al. (2014) conversion rate increases by using 2-3 product pictures, as it creates a clearer visual representation of the product.

McDowell et al. (2016) proved that recommending products and a visible shopping cart icon increases the conversion rate. This also applies to the results of this study. According to Pengnate and Sarathy (2017) visual appeal is more important than ease of use. This is not the case in this study. The interviewees did not like the website, which was visually pleasing, but hard to use. The difficulty of finding information made the website seem untrustworthy. As Belanche et al. (2012) confirms, usability helps to reduce perceived risk.

Another important element of a good website is the ease of finding information. Most interviewees said they would consider purchasing a plant online if they could get a refund in case the plant arrives dead or has pests in it. Therefore, it might be more important to make information about delivery and return policy easily accessible in houseplant e-commerce compared to other e-commerce. Also, the ease of finding information about payment methods and delivery cost was considered important. Additionally, the care instructions for the plants are also required in houseplant e-commerce. Plants require the right care to stay alive. To ensure a good customer experience after the purchase, the online houseplant stores should provide proper care instructions.

As previously mentioned, Tractinsky and Lowengart (2001) proved that high-risk goods involve more consideration of the website than low-risk goods. Presumably, the interviewees considered it important to easily find delivery information, as purchasing houseplants online involve risks during delivery. Probably, if the delivery did not contain risk, but the product itself would be expensive and technologically complex, then product information would be more important than delivery information. This might also explain why Schlosser (2003) and Kim and Lennon (2008) had contradictory results about the importance of visual and verbal information. Probably, the importance of visual or verbal information is dependent on the product. Also, Di et al. (2014) mentioned that the number and quality of pictures are more important when purchasing apparel products compared to electronics. Some products rely more on their visual appeal and others on their technical features. Therefore, the combination of visual and verbal information should depend on the product.

6. VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF THE RESEARCH

A key part of qualitative research is the evaluation of reliability and validity. Validity corresponds to whether the study was conducted correctly and whether the results are valid. Reliability refers to the repeatability of the research. It is essential to justify the chosen research methods. (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006) This study was conducted by qualitative research, as this method is used to study processes, experiences and human behavior (Asper & Corte 2019). We may state that this was a valid research method to study this topic.

The quality of the research data defines how reliable it is. You need to evaluate the reliability during the collection of the data. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000, 184-185) The data was collected by interviewing nine people one by one, which provided adequate information for this study. Both males and females between the ages of 20 and 38 were selected in order to receive diverse perspectives for the study. The interviewees explained their opinions in-depth, which increased the reliability of the research. However, the sample of this study was relatively small due to time and resource limitations.

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

Presumably, the right combination of visual and verbal information depends on the product, therefore it would be interesting to compare the results of this study to other high-risk products. For example, in electronic e-commerce, the risk is in the product itself, as electronics are expensive and technologically complex. In this case, probably the product information would be considered much more important. As houseplant e-commerce involves risks during delivery, the easy access to delivery information was very important.

Most of the interviewees of this study were relatively young. As the younger generations buy more products online compared to older generations (Statista 2020), it is easier for younger consumers to navigate websites. Therefore, the importance of ease of use might become more significant, if the age of the user group of the website is higher. This could be also a potential topic for future research.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview questions

1. Age?
2. Gender?
3. How often do you browse online stores?
4. How often do you shop online?
5. Would you buy plants online? Do you consider it risky?
6. Which online stores were visually most and least pleasing?
7. Which online stores had best and worst product pictures?
8. Which online stores were easy to use?
9. Which online stores were hard to use?
10. From which online stores it was easy to find information?
11. From which online stores it was hard to find information?
12. Which online stores seemed trustworthy and untrustworthy?
13. Which online store was overall most pleasing?
14. From which online store would you purchase a plant?
15. Was any online store familiar to you?