“Looks” and “Styles”: Exploring the Impact of Fashion User-Generated Social Stimuli on Shoppers’ Experiential States and Shopping Behaviour.

Jenny Cheung and Delia Vazquez
jenny.cheung@manchester.ac.uk, delia.vazquez@manchester.ac.uk

Department of Textiles and Paper, School of Materials,
University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.

Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to investigate fashion user-generated social stimulus (UGSS) in online shopping environments. Research questions regarding consumers' perceptions, experiences and potential shopping outcomes are addressed.

Theoretical background - Environments can influence consumers' emotional states and shopping behaviour in the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982). Online activities which involve engagement (Brodie et al., 2013) suggest factors in online environments can affect consumer experiences and their shopping behaviour online (Rose et al., 2012).

Design/Methodology/Approach - A methodology using in-depth interviews with photo-elicitation techniques is proposed. The study seeks to explore female fashion consumers' perceptions of two forms of UGSS identified from the ASOS Fashion Finder website, and to understand consumers' stimulated experiences (Epstein et al., 2006) and shopping behaviour by the UGSS.

Originality/Value - The study provides insight to UGSS and their effects on consumer experiences and shopping behaviour. With no previous research to date, the study makes important contributions to literature for future research.

Keywords Online shopping environment, Social shopping, User-generated content, Customer experiences

Introduction

The fashion online shopping environment (OSE) has become a digital social space for female consumers (Dennis et al., 2010). Fashion consumers are participating in social activities such as sharing product information, personal styles, reviews and opinions to an online community of users; many of which are User-Generated Content (UGC). In fashion, visual forms of UGC have become powerful social elements of the fashion online shopping environment. The nature of fashion revolves around aesthetics and taste, meaning visual UGC such as user-generated "Looks" and "Styles" have become key social elements that promote social interactivity, engagement, and community development for fashion consumption online (Dennis et al., 2010; Olbrich & Holsing, 2011). The literature on the social dimensions of online shopping environments is under-researched (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012). However, the impact of social cues on consumers’ shopping behaviour is critical for fashion e-tailers and academics to understand, given the growing social web driven by social media and technology. In fashion OSE, there is a need to examine the effects of UGC as social stimuli on online behaviour, especially the visual forms of UGC.
The paper reviews online shopping environments, fashion UGC, and online shopping experiences. Theoretical development using the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory with proposed research questions, and the methodology approach are also addressed.

**Online Shopping Environment (OSE)**

Studies on Online Shopping Environments (OSE) have examined design and ambience factors (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012), such as search and navigation features (Lohse & Spiller, 1999), image, colour, and backgrounds (Ha et al., 2007), and music (Kim, Kim & Lennon, 2009). Other stimuli of OSE examined also include product presentation factors (Kim & Lennon, 2008), and product interactivity factors on websites, particularly for fashion apparel (McCormick & Levitt, 2012; Ashman & Vazquez, 2012). However, research on social factors in OSE is under-researched despite the popularity of social media and networking sites, and growing online communities (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012). A small number of studies have looked at individual social factors on websites, such as, virtual sale assistants (Sautter et al., 2003), and avatars (Haubl & Trift, 2000) which play the role of sales personnel to assist customers with online shopping. Increasingly, product reviews features have also gained research attention, where researchers have looked at the effects of positive eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) and using product reviews to create persuasive consumption (Zhang et al. 2010). In a study by Pan and Zhang (2011), product reviews are presented as a form of user-generated content (UGC). UGC is defined as media content created by general users of the Internet rather than by paid professionals (Daugherty, Eastin & Bright, 2008).

**Social dimension of fashion online shopping environments**

The social dimension of fashion OSE can be described to entail different types of social factors. Figure 1 presents the different social factors currently perceived on fashion websites and online social shopping sites and communities like Osoyou, ASOS Fashion Finder, and Polyvore. The social factors can be categorised into three key groups: social factors for customer service and communication, social factors used for promotion and public relation, and more specific to fashion, social factors for co-creation. Social factors for customer service and communication include those previously outlined e.g. virtual sales assistants, product reviews, and also social media and networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which assist in decision-making and the purchase of products or post-purchase experiences. Moreover, there are also social factors used for promotion and public relation by fashion retailers. A facet of social media and networking channels like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, as well as image sharing site such as Pinterest, and mobile applications Instagram, have been adopted by fashion retailers for retail brand and product promotion, and engagement in public relation. Lastly, a number of online social shopping sites and communities have emerged (Olbrich & Holsing, 2011), which combined social networking with online shopping into one, enabling social e-shopping for young fashion consumers (Dennis et al., 2010; Gummerus et al. 2012). Examples include Osoyou, ASOS Fashion Finder, and Polyvore. Social e-shopping sites have large online communities of users who not only shop, but also search, discover, create and share fashion information and content. Co-creation can be used to describe retailer and consumer collaboration on social e-shopping sites, where consumers use tools and social features provided to create and share fashion content. Social factors for co-creation thereby include online communities, but the majority UGC features. Olbrich and Holsing (2011) identified lists, styles, tags, reviews, and user profiles on Polyvore; and Dennis et al. (2010) acknowledged similar user-generated social features on Osoyou, such as community groups, lists and style-files.
Figure 1. The social dimension of the fashion online shopping environment.

Fashion user-generated content

Fashion is a subject that concerns aesthetics and taste, and revolves around aesthetic attraction and visual imagery. A set of important UGC feature in fashion OSE are user-generated "looks" and collages or "styles" (Olbrich and Holsing, 2011), present on social e-shopping sites such as ASOS Fashion Finder and Polyvore, which have significant social impacts on young fashion consumer’s online shopping activity.

The fashion blogging phenomena can be perceived to mark the beginning of fashion UGC (Chittenden, 2010), which democratised the fashion industry (Leung & Goldstein, 2008) and had undeniable impacts on fashion media (Pham, 2011) in both B2C and C2C communication. Fashion blogging involves bloggers creating and sharing images of their personal "looks" or "outfits", similar to exhibiting their outfit choices which are modelled by the blogger (Chittenden, 2010). Such UGC have been adopted in the fashion industry, including e-tailers like ASOS, Zara and Primark to promote products but also to create user engagement (Leung & Goldstein, 2008; Pham, 2011). More recently, user-generated collages which thematically exhibit fashion products and styles have appeared in OSE e.g., on Pinterest, social e-shopping sites such as Polyvore, and ASOS' Fashion Finder. Holsing & Olbrich (2012) and Olbrich & Holsing (2011) defined these collages as "Styles" in their subsequent works on social e-shopping communities, stating "styles" are a new form of UGC but also a social feature of social e-shopping sites.

In fashion e-tailing, fashion UGC is a new means of product display and presentation where shoppers can shop from unique fashion content created by community members (e.g., from a "look" or a user-generated collage - a "style") as opposed to shopping from retailer generated fashion content (e.g., from mannequins or models) on websites.

Online shopping experiences

Consumer experiences have been widely discussed in online shopping and for OSE research (e.g., Demangeot & Broderick, 2006; Pentina et al. 2011). Researchers have looked into online interactivity (Ballentine, 2005; Mollen & Wilson, 2010), customer engagement (Demangeot & Broderick, 2008), and recently, have begun discussing the concept of experience sharing (Chen et al. 2013). Research on OSE is found to have focused on affective and cognitive experiences (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012). For example, affective experiences include emotion, mood, feelings or attitudes; whilst cognitive experiences concerned cognitive appraisal (Ether et al. 2006), knowledge (Haubl & Trifts, 2000), telepresence (Sautter et al.,
2004) or Flow (Rose et al. 2012). In a study identifying online shopping experiences, Pentina et al. (2011) presents website features can influence online experiences such as sensory, cognitive, pragmatic, relational and interactive experiences, which effects consumers’ online shopping behaviour.

Theoretical development

**Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R)**

Studies on retail environments and OSE have adopted an environmental psychology approach to investigate the effects of environmental cues on behaviour. Originally from Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) environmental psychology model, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) was adapted by Donovan and Rossiter (1982) for retail environments. The S-O-R framework proposes that interactions with cues in the environment (stimulus) can influence shoppers' internal states (organism) and affect shopping behaviour (response) (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). The S-O-R framework is adopted for this study which seeks to explore fashion user-generated social stimuli on shopper’s experiential states and shopping behaviour.

**Fashion User-Generated Social Stimulus (UGSS)**

Eroglu et al. (2001) defined stimuli in online shopping environments to include all visual cues visible and audible to the online shopper. Kawaf & Tagg’s (2012) review of pertinent S-O-R literature for OSE found online environmental stimuli studied are very generic, covering various design and ambient factors present on websites. Product presentation features were found to be the focal stimulus on fashion websites, due to inability to try or touch clothing online (Park et al. 2005). A number of social factors examined included product reviews and ratings (Kim & Gupta, 2012; Park & Cho, 2012), recommendations (Haubl & Trifts, 2000), and online sales assistants or avatars (Holzwarth et al., 2006). These factors are not only social but are also UGC. This study will use the term user-generated social stimulus (UGSS) to address these social and user-generated features of OSE.

This study focuses on an important set of UGSS in the fashion OSE. These are the visual elements i.e., user-generated “looks” and collages or “styles” (Olbrich and Holsing, 2011) that displays and presents fashion products. The impacts of “look” and "styles" present on fashion websites can be seen to have positive influences on fashion consumers’ online shopping behaviour from sites such as ASOS Fashion Finder and Polyvore. To date, little or no research have examined user-generated "look" and “styles” and therefore needs to be defined from a consumers perspective, hence, the initial research question asks:

**RQ 1:** How are visual UGSS in fashion online shopping environments perceived by consumers?

**Experiential states**

Environmental cues are outlined to affect internal states such as emotions measured by Pleasure and Arousal which mediates approach-avoidance behaviours (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). Development of the S-O-R framework has suggested additional internal states asides emotions states (Sautter et al., 2004), for example, cognitive states (Bitner, 1992; Eroglu et al., 2001). However, online activities and particularly in social contexts promote consumer engagement (Brodie et al., 2013). Customer experiences have been identified to be influenced by website features and affect behaviour (Pentina et al., 2011; Rose et al., 2012). Rose et al.’s (2012) adaption of the S-O-R model for online customer experiences suggests attributes of e-tail environments can influence consumers’ Cognitive Experiential State (CES) and Affective Experiential State (AES). Pentina et al. (2011) identifies components of online customer experience to include to sensory, cognitive, pragmatic, and relational experiences. Research
on UGC outlines that consumers engage in UGC for different reasons, for example, to consume UGC for information or entertainment; to participate by interacting with content and develop social connections in virtual communities; or produce own content for self-expression and self-actualization (Shao, 2009; Daugherty et al., 2008). It therefore proposes shoppers can experience different types of experiences when stimulated by visual UGSS in the fashion OSE. The second research question therefore asks:

RQ 2: What experiences do consumers have when exposed to visual UGSS in online shopping environments?

**Shopping Behaviour**

Representing the final outcome, response is consumers' behavioural responsiveness to environmental stimulus, mediated by their internal states (Bitner, 1992; Eroglu et al., 2001). Response variables have primarily examined approach-avoidance behaviour (Eroglu et al., 2001; Sautter et al., 2004; Kawaf & Tagg, 2012). Other responses include satisfaction and loyalty (Mummalaneni, 2005); behavioural intentions (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012) i.e., intent to purchase (Koo & Ju, 2010; Kim & Lennon, 2010a), and intentions to revisit (Kim & Lennon, 2010b); and actual response behaviours i.e., purchase, consultation, search on other sites, and intention to re-visit (Wang et al., 2011). As previously mentioned, the UGSS examined in this study: user-generated "looks" and "styles", represents new forms of product presentation. McCormick and Levitt (2012) found that, (1) functional product viewing cues (e.g. personalised product viewing, multi-viewing, and catwalk) are viewed as means to aid purchase during online shopping, whilst elements of the website labelled (2) aesthetic fashion information (e.g. trend media, like social media, magazine and style advice) are found to inspire shopping behaviour. The third research question therefore asks:

RQ3: What shopping outcomes do visual UGSS in fashion online shopping environments lead to?

**Methodology Approach**

**Research approach**

The study will employ semi-structured in-depth interviews utilising photo-elicitation technique (Croghan et al, 2008) to examine shoppers’ perceptions and experiences of the visual UGSS. Face-to-face in-depth interviews will serve to understand how participants perceive UGSS: (1) user-generated looks - photographs, of usually, the user's/creator's personally styled outfit; and (2) user-generated style boards - digital collages collectively exhibiting fashion products and items based on a theme, identified from leading pureplay e-tailer ASOS' Fashion Finder site. Participants are asked to define the UGSS, discuss their experiences towards the stimulus, and their responsive shopping behaviour. To assist participants, photo-elicitation techniques is used as part of the interview procedure to help participants make meaning of the phenomenon (Burt et al., 2007) and stimulate emotions and memory (Epstein et al., 2006). Participants are asked to bring screenshots of the UGSS they like/dislike, or depict any positive/negative experiences to discuss. Where any common or interesting themes emerge, the research will probe to pursue more detail (Britten, 1995). Interviews are recorded and transcribed thematically using a three stage open-axial-selective coding. Transcription began early after the data collection stage to start identifying common themes and categories (Spiggle, 1994).
Sample
Participants are young female users of ASOS’ Fashion Finder aged 18-25, who are the key consumer group who purchases fashion online from ASOS (Mintel, 2012a). Moreover, the under 25s demographic group are reported to be key users of social media, and show high interests in fashion (Keynote, 2012; Mintel, 2012b). Purposive and snowball sampling techniques online are adopted to recruit participants for the following reasons. Firstly, purposive sampling enables researchers to recruit experienced individuals in the phenomena (Mann & Stewart, 2000), in this case community members of social e-shopping sites like ASOS’ Fashion Finder who regularly use the site and consume UGSS such as the "Looks" and/or "Style boards" during their online shopping activity. Secondly, snowball sampling online is the process of finding one participant through another (Mann and Stewart, 2000). Community members of Fashion Finder have profiles which show number of followers and those the individual member follows herself, meaning the researcher can find relevant participants through these lists.

Conclusion
This research seeks to analyse the under-researched topic of UGSS in the fashion online retail environment, particularly the visual elements. Two new social stimuli have been identified as significant elements in the environment, namely user-generated “looks” and “styles”. It is clear the impact on consumer behaviour is significant, and this research seeks to uncover the relationships between visual fashion UGSS and their impact on consumer experiences and shopping behaviour.
References


