

# **An exploratory study to understand online consumers' experiential responses towards fashion visual content**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore online consumers' experiential response towards visual user-generated content in online shopping environments for fashion online shopping. The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework has been widely used online shopping environment studies to examine the effect of website attributes on online shoppers' internal affective and cognitive states, and shopping behaviour (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012). Recent literature in the field proposes a more holistic model of online experiences (e.g., Pentina, Amialchuk, & Taylor, 2011) which is conceptualised to mediate the relationship between website attributes and behavioural responses. Consumer experience is regarded a critical concept in consumer behaviour and marketing in order to understand consumers and create competitive advantage in online retailing (Schmitt, 2010). Building on existing online shopping environment research, the study conceptualises online experiences for fashion online. The exploratory study investigates online consumers' experiential responses (aesthetics, relational, emotional, Flow experience and interactivity) towards user-generated photographs of fashion outfits created by community members of an online social shopping community, ASOS Fashion Finder. 12 photo-elicited interviews (PEI) with female online shoppers of ASOS, aged 18-25, were conducted. The results of the study present initial insights to understanding the experiential states of fashion online consumers for retail marketing.

## **1. Introduction**

The online shopping environment for fashion is perceived to comprise of design, online atmospherics and product viewing attributes (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012). Recently, a social dimension has arisen, made up of a facet of social attributes which facilitates online shopping. Some of these social attributes are utilised for a mix of marketing, promotion and communication purposes to mass audiences, for example, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Google+, as well as social mobile applications like Instagram. Live chat features which enable online shoppers to talk to sales representatives through a live messenger service, have been also been acknowledged in research literature (e.g., Kim et al. 2009; Sautter et al. 2004). Live chat features are portraying the role of sales personnel in physical stores. In a sense, the above social attributes are all initiated by retailers i.e. retailer-generated. Besides these, there is also a set of social attributes which are empowered by consumers in the online shopping environment, and they can have significant influence on consumers' online shopping behaviour. These are attributes like online product reviews, product ratings, comments, and in more visual contexts, photographs and even videos; which can all provide consumers with additional, and to an extent, more detailed product information than retail-generated content. In the research literature, the impact of social attributes such as social media (Sashi, 2012), live chat features (Kim et al., 2009), online product reviews and comments (Hsiao et al., 2010; Jiménez & Mendoza, 2013) on shopping behaviour have been examined. However, despite today's popular social activity in fashion, promoted by fashion blogging and "Selfie" phenomenon, to take photographs of one's own outfits, and sharing it onto social media or social platforms such as a blog, or even posting them onto social online shopping communities like Polyvore or a retailer's brand community

web page; little attention has been given to explore the impact of visual user-generated content of fashion for online shopping. Thus, the current study seeks to examine the impact of such novel social attributes in online environments for fashion online shopping.

Approached from an environmental psychology perspective, Donovan & Rossiter's (1982) Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework has been widely used online shopping environment studies to examine the effects of website attributes on online shoppers' internal affective and cognitive states, and shopping behaviour (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012). In recent research studies, a shift towards conceptualising the realms of experience (e.g., Pentina, Amialchuk, & Taylor, 2011) and experiential states (Rose, Clark, Samouel, & Hair, 2012; Rose, Hair, & Clark, 2011) as the mediator to understand the relationship between website attributes and behavioural responses has emerged. Consumer experience is regarded a critical concept in consumer behaviour and marketing research in order to understand consumers and create competitive advantage in online retailing (Schmitt, 2010). Building on existing online shopping environment research, the purpose of this study is to explore online consumers' experiences towards visual user-generated content for fashion online shopping.

## **2. *Online experiential responses***

Consumers' internal response to attributes in online shopping environments have mostly been studied as emotional and cognitive experiences (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012). Emotions in the online context have frequently been measured through dimensions of Pleasure and Arousal (Donovan, Rossiter, Marcolyn, & Nesdale, 1994; Mummalaneni, 2005), and cognition referred to consumers' mental processes, such as attitudes, beliefs, comprehension and knowledge stimulated by the environment (Kim & Lennon, 2010a). However, in marketing literature, experience is viewed as a multi-dimensional structure comprised of several components besides emotions and cognition. Gentile, Spiller, & Noci (2007) proposed that online customer experiences entail sensory, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, lifestyle and relational properties. Similarly, Verhoef et al. (2009) outline that customer experiences should not only consider cognitive evaluations and affective response, but also the social and physical components. Given the multi-dimensional structure of experiences, Pentina et al. (2011) proposed that a holistic experiential model to measure consumers' experiences of online environments needs to be conceptualised. According to Pentina et al. (2011), consumers can be perceived to experience five different types of online experiences when stimulated by website features. These are sensory, cognitive, relational, pragmatic and interactivity experiences (Pentina et al., 2011), similar to those proposed by Gentile et al. (2007).

### **2.1 *Sensory experience***

Sensorial experiences concern the stimulation of the five human senses i.e. sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell (Gentile et al., 2007). In the online environment, sensory experiences is limited to visual and auditory cues (Im, Lennon, & Stoel, 2010). Visual experiences is regarded to be more important than auditory experiences due to the need for product viewing and product information seeking in online shopping (Im et al., 2010). As a result, online product presentations such as integrative image technologies like zoom, 3D viewing, and catwalks (McCormick & Livett, 2012) are important attributes of websites that sell fashion and apparel as they provide visual product information. In experiences literature, Hirschman & Holbrook (1982) identified that visual stimuli concerned hedonic consumption behaviour, and is related to aesthetics and pleasure (Guido, Capestro, & Peluso, 2007). Aesthetics is defined as an individual's perceived perception for beauty and pleasing appearances (Lavie & Tractinsky, 2004). Kauppinen-Räsänen and Luomala (2010) studied aesthetic experience based on attractiveness, for example based on colour, quality, brand image or personal

interrelationships. Studies examining web aesthetics have focused on features such as design, colour, and use of images (Chang, Chih, Liou, & Hwang, 2014; Lavie & Tractinsky, 2004; Y. J. Wang, Minor, & Wei, 2011). Consequently, exploring consumers' sensory experience of visual attributes on e-retail websites, especially in the context for fashion, can be examined by looking at aesthetic experiences.

## 2.2 *Relational experience*

Gentile et al. (2007) describes relational experiences during consumption and outline it "involves the person and, beyond his/her social context, his/her relationship with other people... [and] also with his/her ideal self" (Gentile et al. 2007, p. 398). This suggests that the relational experience taps into consumer behaviour concerning self-concepts, identities and social reference groups. Pentina et al. (2011) outline that in online environments, relational experience is about socialising with other online shoppers, and feeling a sense of belonging to a social group, or affirming particular values and lifestyles. In fashion consumer behaviour, consumers are motivated to consume clothes for utilitarian, hedonic and social reasons (Babin, Darden, Griffin, & Darden, 2013; Tauber, 1972), and extensive literature have also explored the relationships of consumption and self-concepts (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987; Peters, Shelton, & Thomas, 2011). These research streams reflects Gentile et al. (2007) and Pentina et al. (2011) notion of relational experience.

## 2.3 *Emotional experiences*

Emotions in research literature have been adopted from Mehrabian & Russell's (1974) pleasure and arousal (P-A) model. Feelings of pleasure relates to satisfaction, content, hope, happy and relaxed, whilst arousal feelings are described to be frenzied, jittery, simulated, excited, aroused and wide awake for example (Kim & Lennon, 2010b). In fashion, clothing can have positive and negative moods on individual emotions (Moody et al., 2010). Meneses and Rodríguez (2010) show that involvement with fashion results from positive emotions i.e., happiness, which occurs because of motive of aesthetic self-realisation or comfort. Although the literature on fashion consumption and involvement suggests that consumers express emotional experiences towards fashion; however these are not clearly defined as to what types of emotions that shoppers experience. In advertising research, Phillips & McQuarrie (2011) identifies that fashion adverts generated positive emotions such as creative, amused, inspired, and interested for example.

## 2.4 *Cognitive experience*

Cognitive experiences are those linked to thinking or conscious mental processes (Gentile et al., 2007). Gentile et al. (2007) outlines this can involve individuals using their creativity or engaging in problem solving activities (Pentina et al., 2011). In online environments, the concept of Flow has been widely used to measure online users' cognitive experiences. Flow is a concept that occurs in human-computer interactions and consumer behaviour (Hongki Kim, Suh, & Lee, 2013), and is a state when users are totally immersed in an online activity and forgetting what's around them (van Noort, Voorveld, & van Reijmersdal, 2012).

## 2.5 *Pragmatic experience and interactivity*

One of the dimensions of experience in marketing literature is pragmatic experiences. Gentile et al. (2007) outline that pragmatic experiences is a result of a physical act in doing something. Similarly, in the online context, Pentina et al. (2011) identifies interactivity as a new component of experience which refers to consumers' interactions with the website itself, for example, using features like wish lists, email and social networking tools, as well as reading reviews, checking product rating, saving and sharing content, and posting comments

(Shao, 2009). Engaging in social interactions such as connecting with friends and interacting on social networks is also considered as interactive experiences (Pentina et al., 2011).

### **3. Methodology**

This exploratory study investigates online consumers' experiential responses (aesthetic, relational, emotional, interactivity, and flow experience) towards user-generated photographs of fashion outfits on ASOS Fashion Finder ([www.fashionfinder.asos.com](http://www.fashionfinder.asos.com)), an online social shopping community. The term "Looks", which is used by ASOS to describe user-generated photographs, is adopted in this study to address the stimuli and for identification purposes. Looks, closely resemble content akin to blogger styled photographs, and can be described to show individuals modelling their outfits and styles in the form of a complete head-to-toe "look". Photo-elicited interviews (PEI) is an appropriate technique for visual studies (Breazeale & Ponder, 2013) and photographs or images (i.e., screenshots) can stimulate memory (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006; Gulotta, Faste, & Mankoff, 2012) and enable participants to express in more detail their opinions about the subject (McCormick & Livett, 2012). PEI also allow the researcher to explore feelings and experiences using visuals prompts (Gulotta et al., 2012). A total of 12 semi-structured PEIs, lasting between 45 minutes to 1 hour, were conducted over the course of two months.

#### **3.1 Participants**

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit research participants. The criteria was female online shoppers of ASOS, aged 18-25. According to Mintel (2013b), 18-25 year old females are the main target audiences and shoppers of ASOS. Moreover, 18-25 year olds are also reported to be the leading consumer group of online shopping and users of social media and networking sites (Mintel, 2013a).

#### **3.2 Procedure**

Undergraduate students enrolled on a fashion degree at the University of Manchester were sent email invitations to participate in the interview. After receiving consent, participants were asked to complete a photo-elicitation task at home, and email the results back to the researcher prior to the interview. The task involved browsing Looks on the Fashion Finder website, and taking screenshots of examples that made an impression on them e.g., likes and dislikes (McCormick & Livett, 2012). Participants are instructed to paste the screenshots onto a word document. Participants were asked to provide their own examples of Outfits and Looks as people's evaluation of aesthetics are based on subjective and affective judgements (Im et al., 2010), but also consumers' relational experiences are based on personal interrelationships with the stimuli and the content. Face-to-face interviews took place within three days after the task completion. During the interview, participants were shown their screenshots one at a time on an iPad, and asked a series of opened ended questions to discuss why they selected the pictures, and their experiential responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed over the course of the data collection period.

#### **3.3 Data analysis**

Data was analysed using a template analysis with the three stage open-axial-selective coding technique (Breazeale & Ponder, 2013). The five dimensions of experience (Aesthetics, Relational, Emotional, Interactivity, and Flow) presented the initial themes (open codes) for data analysis. In the first stage of the analysis, the text was coded into the relevant open codes (King & Horrocks, 2010). An initial template was developed by categorising common themes within the open codes into second-level (axial) codes, and any further sub-themes within these were refined into third-level (selective) codes (King & Horrocks, 2010). The

template was continuously revised as additional information was added from the rest of the data sets.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

##### **Aesthetic experience**

Kauppinen-Räsänen & Loumala (2010) note that aesthetic experience concerns the degree of attractiveness. Respondents were asked what was visually attractive or appealing about the Looks they provided in their examples. A number of common themes which emerged were background, colour and co-ordination that influenced shoppers' aesthetic experiences.

##### *Backgrounds*

The background in the Looks played an important role in consumers' visual experience. Preference for images to be taken outside, for example on the street, appealed to consumers as it set a scene for them to relate to.

*"I was attracted to this because of the image [...] the background sort of makes it looks like she's walking a dog, it sort of tells a story, sort of creates an aspirational image."*[10]

*"I was just sort of drawn to it. I think her...sort of the way it set a scene, she's sort of riding a bike."*[7]

##### *Colour combination*

Colour combination was a theme that the majority of respondents commented on finding "appealing", for example, one respondent said "...the colours of the clothes and how they're composed, and what accessories they wear with them as well" was visually appealing when asked to discuss their thoughts on what attracted them to their given example. The use of colour has been widely explored in studies of visual merchandising for physical and online retail contexts to attract consumers (e.g., Kerfoot et al., 2003), and influence consumer shopping time, mood and choices (Soars, 2009). In terms of experience, the findings suggests that consumers' aesthetic experience is stimulated by colour as Kauppinen-Räsänen and Luomala (2010) had proposed in their study for aesthetic experiences based on colour attraction.

##### *Style Co-ordination*

Interestingly, consumers did not focus on colour alone nor individual items, but rather, the overall looks including the way the how the subject in the picture presented herself. For example;

*"...her outfit in general stands out. Maybe because the colour contrasts, and then the way she's got everything, like her blue top is cool, and the sunglasses as well, and her posture, the way she is posing."*[2]

The co-ordination of products alongside colour combination was an important element as respondents emphasised on "the whole look together, how it's put together and the colours". Coordination of product displays is acknowledged to be an important factor in retail environments (Kerfoot, Davies, & Ward, 2003), and is equally as important in online contexts (Yoo & Kim, 2012). Wu et al., (2013) outline that well co-ordinated products can attract consumers and provide pleasurable shopping experiences which can lead to future patronage.

Summarising respondents' aesthetic experiences, a strong connection could be identified between respondents' aesthetic experiences with emotions as respondents also expressed feelings of enjoyment when viewing Looks. In the literature, existing research have found that visual content such as product images lead to pleasurable experiences on viewers (Katerattanakul, 2002).

### **Emotional experience**

Respondents were asked how the Looks made them feel in order to understand online shoppers' emotional responses towards the visual stimuli. The emotional response of shoppers when viewing looks indicated feelings of pleasure, for example, respondents showed expressions of excitement:

*"It makes you think, "Ooh, if I was doing it, how would I do it?"[8]*

As well as showing levels of enjoyment when browsing through the Looks:

*"I would probably say I enjoyed looking through the Looks. I could probably do that for hours, just looking at people's different Looks they have created."[7]*

Feelings of arousal was also evident, particularly the feeling of being inspired, and at the same time, respondents also showed signs of interest either by seeking more information, or thinking about how to create something similar to what they have seen.

*"As soon as I started looking, I felt inspired. Then I was inclined to look further, like in other places and go to this girl's blog to see what else she's got, so I think it's easy to spend a lot of time looking". [9]*

*"I think it does make me feel...it does inspire me I suppose, and it kind of gets me thinking about what I would do if I was doing it." [6]*

The emotions that respondents felt towards Looks closely reflect similar emotions identified in consumers viewing fashion advertisements (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2011). Moreover, in both pleasure and arousal dimensions of the emotions identified, respondents showed signs of other experiences, for example, cognitive processes in terms of what they would do.

### **Relational experience**

The relational dimension showed that respondents are drawn to Looks which reflect their personal style. After being drawn to the image by the colours and products, respondents relate to the image with their own fashion interests.

*"I really liked the trainers, obviously that really drew me to the outfit because they're bright in comparison to the rest of it. And also at the moment, I am interested in wearing everything black, and also she's blonde and I'm blonde, and she's wearing everything black. I just really liked the style. It's just something that I would wear at the moment. I really love the trainers with it as well."[3]*

Desmet and Hekkert (2007) outline that people give meanings to objects and therefore symbolic significance related to the self. For example, they state that an individual can be attracted to a record player because it represents childhood memories. In fashion consumer behavior, Solomon & Rabolt, Nancy (2004) outline that people consume fashion based on personal values such as personal interest, style, personality and taste, which means shoppers can relate, or give meaning to fashion content from a personal level that reflects the self. The

findings from the study suggest that consumers are drawn to images of Looks which reflect their actual self-image of their ideal fashion style:

*"I wouldn't particularly click on something completely different to what I would wear. I mean that style would look nice on her but I wouldn't click on it. I would go straight pass it, whereas for me to click on to it, it would have to be something that I would wear or I would want to wear or I wish I could wear."* [6]

### **Flow experience**

Experiences of flow was evident during respondents' browsing activity on the Looks. The findings showed that respondents wanted to look further and beyond the Looks, for example, for other products on the page or on other web pages like the user's blog.

*"After looking at one of this model's pictures, I just want to continue scrolling down to see if there are other items that I like, so I ended up scrolling down to the end of all her pictures that she posted."* [2]

*"I was inclined to look further like in other places, and like go to this girl's blog to see what else she's got, so I think it's easy to spend a lot of time looking."* [9]

Respondents also showed signs of spending longer or more time to view the Looks as a result of experiencing pleasurable emotional experiences.

*"I would probably say I enjoyed looking through the Looks a little more, yeah. I could probably do that for hours, just look at people's different Looks that they have created."* [11]

The finding supports the work of Kim et al. (2013) where shopping enjoyment has significant impacts on shoppers' state of flow, and can lead to continued intention to use collaborative online shopping websites. In early studies of flow (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Novak et al. 2000), affective experiences can lead to flow experiences. For example, feelings of pleasure and arousal have been identified to positively lead to flow (Wang et al., 2007). As a result, the findings in the current study indicate that shoppers' emotional experiences of Looks may have some influence on consumers' experience of flow.

### **Interactivity**

#### *Content interactivity*

In online customer experiences, interactivity was conceptualised as consumers' interactivity with the website, which also includes social interactivity with others in the online community (Pentina et al., 2011). Respondent's interactivity with Looks demonstrated actions to click-out onto product links, for example, for more product information about individual items on the Look, and also intentions to purchase.

*"I wasn't looking for one so it was kind of when I saw that and I was like "ooh I really liked that" and so I clicked on it and I clicked on the images. So I probably would have bought that if it was available."* [6]

*"I really liked that [Look]. You can actually see what it looks like on, and I really liked the clothes. I was actually pricing up the clothes after it because I was looking for something similar to that, so it made me like click on the clothes and then that's one of the things I have clicked on and then I priced it up and then I began looking elsewhere for something similar."* [12]

### *Social interactivity*

Interestingly, social interactivity with the Looks received negative response from all respondents. Sharing the Looks or products within the Looks on social media channels like Facebook or Twitter was unfavourable and considered "*strange*" or "*weird*". Although shopping in physical contexts has been perceived as a social activity in the research literature (e.g., Tauber, 1972), reflecting consumers' hedonic and social motivations (Borges, Chebat, & Babin, 2010), in the online context on the other hand, despite the growing social platforms for shopping, online shopping is still very much a very personal and individual activity, as respondents state:

*"No, I don't really share anything. I don't, I don't know. I don't feel the need, I don't think people are interested in seeing like a collage of outfits that I like."* [3]

*"I think just me personally; [...] I probably wouldn't share it. I'd rather just keep a note for myself and think "Right, that's an item for my holidays". I'd probably just hand write a little list, or I often put a note on my iPad of something I've seen. Once I come back to buying things, then I will go and look at that."* [4]

This stage of online shopping to respondents has been considered the "initial" or "research" stage. During consumers' browsing activity for fashion online at this initial stage, the process is considered private and personal, and therefore reluctant to share their ideas with others.

*"This is my research. So I don't want to share, otherwise someone else might do it first."* [8]

*"I just don't want the whole wide world to see! [...] It's just the process for me; it's like research for me rather than telling anyone else about it. ... I don't feel like anyone would be interested either."* [1]

## **5. Summary**

The paper presents the initial exploratory insights to examining online consumer experiences for fashion shopping. The study examined the experiential responses that online shoppers have towards a popular visual user-generated content present in today's online shopping environment for fashion online shopping. Understanding the individual experiential states of online shoppers can provide useful knowledge for e-retailers in designing websites that will engage consumers with goal-orientated and/or experiential behaviours for online shopping.



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