What do consumers look for when they shop online?

Ahmad Saquib Sina

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

**Introduction**

The importance of online shopping has been growing significantly. Online sales growth becomes much faster than it has been before and total online retail sales of 2016 are worth $1.915 Trillion (eMarketer, 2016). eMarketer estimates indicate that total sales will be going $27 trillion in 2020. According to the Forrester (2017) report, online retail sales will grow at an average of 12.3% per year over the next five years (2017-2021) in Western Europe.

Online apparel sales have played a significant role in the growth of e-commerce business in the USA (eMarketer, 2016). Total sales from online apparel sites reached $60 billion in 2015, which is a 17.2% share of total US retail e-commerce. This is because online apparel sites have adopted innovative features such as virtual try-on technology, product virtualization technologies (Kim & Forsythe, 2008), image interactive technology (Song, Fiore & Park, 2007), innovative dimensions in website quality (Kim & Stoel, 2004), and sensory enabling technology (Kim & Forsythe, 2009). It appears that online apparel sites have made a significant development to improve the quality and consumer rates in online shopping are rapidly increasing. This qualitative study is designed to look for the new issues for further development of the consumers’ online apparel shopping experience. Therefore, this study seeks to cast light on what consumers’ look for when they shop online.

Research indicates that online apparel site has been developed their features a lot and therefore the business is increasing. The purpose of this study is to explore the perception of online shopping experience with three online consumers to get a better understanding of their shopping perspective. The following questions are addressed to reveal the problem.

1. What are the factors that consumers look for when they tend to buy apparel online?

2. What are the preferences/dislikes when consumers are on the online apparel sites?

3. What are the recent changes/ developments of the online apparel websites that consumers observe during their shopping?

4. What are the challenges/difficulties that consumers face during the online apparel shopping?

5. How do online retailers decide whether consumers will buy apparel products online?

6. How can online fashion retailers better serve the consumers?

**Role of the Researcher**

I strongly believe that the role of the researcher is critical for the study. I should not try to remain outside the system. I need not try to achieve objectivity because it is crucial for the quantitative research and not for the qualitative one. I need to reveal myself through self-reflexivity. In addition to revealing the self, the researcher should reveal what he or she learns about the other. By "the other" I mean those who are studied. Unlike quantitative research, where those who are studied are the subjects or the sample-nameless and faceless individuals and have been chosen at random to represent others with similar characteristics, those studied in qualitative research are real people with real needs, ambitions, fears, and desires. Their stories touch the researcher and touch the readers. I think that this is how we become so captivated and energized by them.

I argue here that the understanding of the other does not come about without the understanding of the self and how the self and the other connect. I also believe that everyone becomes transformed through this research process. I have chosen to divide my personal criteria along several dimensions. What was studied? What was found? How was the study done? How does the writer communicate?

The grounds for this study begins with the researcher’s desire to uncover ways to investigate the preference of the consumers’ during their online apparel shopping. As online shopping sites have been increasingly developing, it is imperative to understand the consumers’ search process and the importance of their skills.

**Method**

**Participants**

A snowball sampling strategy, sometimes referred to as network or chain sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2001) is employed, whereby participants are asked to refer other individuals whom they know to be experienced in online apparel shopping. The guideline for selection of participants is as follows:

• All participants have an experience of 10 to more than 50 times of online apparel shopping for last three years.

The research sample includes three young women who are from 18-20 years of age. All participants are White Americans. They are undergraduate students of the College of Design, Housing, and Apparel of the University of Minnesota. Two participants are at senior levels, and the other participant is at a junior level. These three participants visit the same online apparel sites, including Amazon, Von Maur, Zappos, JC Penney, and Younkers. The participants’ expenditures on internet apparel purchases range from $500 to over $1000 annually.

**Procedure**

Three in-depth semi-structured interviews are carried out from middle February to middle March. Each interviewee completes their consent form. They are asked the same interview questions. Each interview lasts 30-45 minutes. During the observation, each session is recorded with the permission of participants. All interviews are carried out on the Saint Paul campus, University of Minnesota. At the end of interviews, participants are thanked for their participation and paid an honorarium of $ 15 USD.

All three interviews of participants are transcribed, and themes are developed. The responses of all participants are analyzed for themes. The repeated uses of words are detected to develop themes (Van Manen, 1990). After developing themes, a peer review has been conducted to verify it.

**Materials and Approach**

The qualitative methodology emphasizes discovery and description, and objectives are focused on extracting and interpreting the meaning of experience (Bodgan & Bikklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998, 2009). Therefore, a qualitative approach is applied to enhance the contextual understanding of participants’ online apparel shopping experience.

Within the framework of the qualitative approach, this study is most suited for a phenomenology study. As a form of research methodology, the main goal of the phenomenology is to arrive at a description of the nature of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The present research is consistent with phenomenology research studies because it allows us a better understanding of what people look for when they shop online.

Questions for in-depth interviews are developed to discover participants underlying motivations associated with their online shopping experiences. For example, two research questions are: “Tell me about your recent experience with online shopping?” and “How do you decide what to buy?” Participants are asked to describe their choices, feelings, and problems when they shop online. Finally, the researcher asks participants to give their specific thoughts while going through their chosen online site. This observation has done because an observation works “best in a back-and-forth process with interviews” (Glesne, 2011, p. 75). Interview questions are:

1. Please describe how the experience begins.

Probes:

a) What kind of apparel products are you looking for?

b) What websites are you looking at?

2. Will you see any technological developments or changes in the case of online apparel shopping?

Probes:

a. Is the screen appealing visually? In what way?

b. What does this opening screen look like? (ask about text and graphics)

3. What are the characteristics that attract you more for the online apparel shopping?

Probes:

a. Does the web always respond in the way you expect it?

4. What are the challenges/difficulties of the online apparel shopping?

Probes:

a. Can you please tell me more about the problem of size and fit of your items?

5. Do you have any favorite websites for the online apparel shopping?

Probes:

a. Why do you like it?

b. Can you tell more about its special features?

6. Tell me about your suggestions to improve the apparel shopping experience?

Probes:

a. How can online fashion retailers better serve the consumers?

b. Do you see any change in technological development? In what way?

c. How will customization help you?

**Results**

This chapter presents the key findings obtained from three in-depth interviews. Five major findings emerge from this study:

***Finding 1:*** All three participants express that convenience is the most enjoyable aspect of online apparel shopping.

Online shopping allows participants to shop online whenever and wherever they want. Therefore, participants can enhance opportunities to shop for apparel online. On this point Megan comments:

*“Online shopping is very convenient because the whole merchandise is arranged beautifully. One of the most important things is that the shopping sites send me a lot of updates of the apparel items. Also, I can shop online when I am on the bus (laughs).”*

As two other students put it:

*“I can easily get the apparel items when I shop online. The items are always in the stock (Kierra).”*

*“Shopping online enables me to buy apparel easily. It is convenient. I guess if I were limited due to being at home, I would probably value it more (Hyein).”*

***Finding 2:*** All participants express the need for a video of a natural walking model with similar demographic characteristics.

Participants can better guess what an apparel item looks like when they see a video of a natural walking model with similar demographic characteristics. Furthermore, this helps them to select the right size of an apparel item. Participants express their opinions in the following ways:

*“I look for a certain model, the model who is walking and who looks like me. I do not like the model when it is not motionless (Kierra).”*

*“If I do not see a video of a model walking on a site, I skip that site. I do not prefer to buy anything from that site. One of the main problems of the online shopping is that I cannot try on it. I cannot look the apparel items physically. So, at that point, choosing an item depends on guessing. Therefore, I prefer a video of a natural walking model (laughs) (Hyein).”*

*“I like the video of a natural walking model. When I look a model walking on an online site, I feel that it will be safe to buy an apparel item because the model looks like me (emphasis) (Megan).”*

***Finding 3:*** All three participants indicate that they use product rotation by having photographs with multiple angles of an apparel item and zooming during their online apparel shopping.

Participants discuss the interactive features of apparel shopping websites. Through the interactive features, they can get the detailed information about an apparel product. Kierra describes it in this way: *“Product rotation allows me to see the all possible views of a garment. Therefore, it captures my attention. Also, bigger image of an apparel item generates pleasurable experience.”* As two other participants put it:

*“Online apparel shopping is risky. Therefore, I look for everything in an image, enlarge it and see if it looks nice. Product rotation and zooming mitigate the drawbacks of limited information of an apparel item. It makes my shopping experience vivid (Hyein).”*

*“I always look for the product movement and zooming functions on an online site. This is because I need to look for the color, texture and the size. The zooming function helps me to reduce the perceived risk because it minimizes my perception of uncertainty (emphasis) for online shopping (Megan).”*

***Finding 4:*** Majority of participants (2of 3) cite good return policy as an important factor when they make a purchase decision.

It is not surprising that consumers purchase more from the online apparel site and some apparel items are not so good. Returning unsatisfactory items is considered one of the most important factors when the consumers make a purchase decision. Participants frame the need for a good return policy as follows:

*“One of the problems of an online apparel site is the return policy. I always purchase my apparel items from Nordstrom because their return policy is very good. I like online shopping, and I have bought a lot of apparel items. However, some items are not so good. Therefore, I need to return them. (Hyein).”*

“*I like Amazon just because they do not have any questions about returns. I can order whatever I need and want to look at and if it does not fit, I can take it back or send it back (laughs) (Megan).”*

One participant reports that she looks at the posted consumers’ reviews of items that she wants to buy. Particularly, the reviews are related to the ratings or feedback on an apparel product. Kierra describes this in the following way:

*“I always read all the reviews through, and I always prefer those products with a positive feedback history. If I see people saying: “this shrank when I washed it,” then I will probably not purchase it.”*

***Finding 5*:** All participants indicate that they are concerned about both the fit and size of an apparel item when they shop online.

Fit and size of an apparel item are not only one of the main concerns, but also one of the most important factors affecting participants’ preferences for shopping from their accustomed online sites. Participants express their opinions in the following ways:

*“I always think about the fit and size of an apparel item. I go to my preferred website, Amazon to order an item because I know what size I need and I know that my item will fit me (Kierra).”*

*“I like my online shopping from Nordstrom because I am experienced with this online site. I know everything about it, and I know exactly the size I want (Megan).”*

“*I go to my usual online apparel site because I do not need to think about my size and fit at that time. Furthermore, I have an idea of both the size and fit of the apparel items from different types of brands (Hyein).”*

**Limitations of the Study**

The major limitation of this study is that the research sample is restricted. Therefore, a critique of this research might be the limited possibility of generalizing this study to other groups and other programs. Another important limitation is that only interview method is used as the data collection technique. However, triangulation is critical while attempting to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under the study (Creswell, 2012). A related limitation is that interviewees may have had difficulty adjusting to the researchers taking on the role of interviewees, a phenomenon referred to by Maxwell (2005) as participant reactivity. Another major limitation of this study is the researcher subjectivity because analysis depends on the thinking and choices of the researcher.

**Discussion and Interpretation of Finings**

This research illustrates how people look for products when they shop online.

Through three interviews, research participants provide extensive information about their online shopping experiences. Findings from interviews are analyzed according to their motivations for online apparel shopping and their major viewpoints of online shopping expression that are discussed in this chapter.

The first and the second research questions seek to determine the most important factors that encourage participants to shop for apparel online. Participants indicate that convenience seems to be more important for them because they are now well informed about the new product, and it saves them time and energy. One of the participants, Kierra, reflects that “*The ads or apparel items are now in the pages: Instagram, Facebook. When I saw the clothing pictures in the Instagram, my eyes pop up. One of the interesting things is that they send me a lot of updates of the clothing that is what is going on now*”. Jeannie Walters, the writer, and the CEO of 360 Connext.com gives credence to this perspective:

*“There are many ways retailers and others have tried to offer convenience during the typical experience. The game changers, however, are the ones who created new ways of interacting with their customers (p. 13).”*

This finding is harmonious with the previous studies on online shopping (Kim et al., 2013; Kwon & Lee, 2003; Kwon & Noh, 2010). Online shopping gives consumers the opportunity to shop 24/7, and they can do shopping at any place. Moreover, it is pollution-free shopping and consumers can avoid crowding.

The overwhelming majority of participants in this study share the perception that they can get more information about the apparel item if the company provides a video of a natural walking model. All participants in this study also indicate that they can better guess what the items look like when they see a model walking. Lees et al. (2010) provide support to this idea:

*“Consumers tend to have the perspective of comparing with others toward their shopping views. Therefore, they look for similar others to match their items during the online apparel shopping. In that case, the natural walking model with similar demographic characteristics facilitates them to purchase the online apparel items (p. 14).”*

Another important feature of the online website is the product movement by having photographs with multiple angels of an apparel item and zooming technology. Participants argue that they cannot touch the product, but when they see the different views of the product and can zoom on it, it reduces their perceived risk with purchasing the apparel items. Park (2005) explains it in this way:

“*Because the internet purchase apparel is risky, there is a strong need to develop a better product rotation and zooming technology to reduce perceived risk and create pleasurable shopping experiences of the consumers (p. 1).”*

Participants also indicate that they are concerned about both the size and fit of the garments during the online apparel shopping process because they cannot try on them. They need to make a purchase decision based on online retailer’s information on the website. Therefore, consumers always prefer online sites they are accustomed to because they shop a lot from them, and they are familiar with the size and fit of the garments. Ashdown & Na (2009) explain that:

*“Though the online retailer makes significant changes and improvement in online apparel, however, due to the absence of the standardized sizing system, the participants are yet concerned about their online apparel shopping (p.3).”*

One important aspect of online apparel shopping that could reduce participants’ concerns is reading reviews and ratings by consumers. They can reduce the risk of online apparel shopping through information gained from reading the reviews regarding the fit and size of garments, color, and quality.

One of the research questions of this study seeks to determine consumers’ suggestions regarding online apparel shopping. Participants indicate that they need a good return policy for the unsatisfactory item. If the retailers do not give the guarantee, then consumers will often avoid buying the product. Lee et al. (2009) insist that a good return policy is an essential for online business. The author notes:

*“A good return policy, which includes free shipping to return, an easy return process, and availability to return a product to a store, all had a positive effect on the participants’ decisions for purchasing apparel products online (p. 39).”*

**Implications**

The first finding of this study is convenience. Convenience can increase the market share of online shopping globally due to the ability of consumers to order products from around the world.

The second finding of this study is a video of a walking model with similar demographic characteristics. It can be concluded that the video of a walking model creates visually informative displays that can enhance the online business.

The third finding is product rotation by having photographs with multiple angels of an apparel item and zooming technology. These will mitigate or eliminate the belief of customers that online shopping is risky, which is likely to increase their online purchasing behavior.

The fourth finding is a good return policy. A good return policy will increase the consumers’ loyalty and consumer engagement in online shopping. An unclear return policy may result in poor sales.

The last finding is that consumers are concerned about both the size and fit of an apparel item. More improvement in customization technique is required because consumers can easily choose their fit and size independently and confidently.

**References**

Ashdown, S. P., & Na, H. (2008). Comparison of 3-D body scan data to quantify upper-body

postural variation in older and younger women. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, *26*(4), 292-307.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five*

*approaches*. Sage publications.

Dessart, L., Veloutsou, C., & Morgan-Thomas, A. (2015). Consumer engagement in online brand

communities: a social media perspective. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *24*(1), 28-42.

Kim, J., & Forsythe, S. (2008). Adoption of virtual try-on technology for online apparel

shopping. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *22*(2), 45-59

Kim, J., & Forsythe, S. (2009). Adoption of sensory enabling technology for online apparel

shopping. *European Journal of Marketing*, *43*(9/10), 1101-1120.

Kim, J., & Forsythe, S. (2007). Hedonic usage of product virtualization technologies in online

apparel shopping. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, *35*(6),

502-514.

Lee, H. H., Kim, J., & Fiore, A. M. (2010). Affective and cognitive online shopping experience:

Effects of image interactivity technology and experimenting with appearance. *Clothing and textiles research Journal*, *28*(2), 140-154.

O'Brien, H. L., & Toms, E. G. (2008). What is user engagement? A conceptual

framework for defining user engagement with technology. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, *59*(6), 938-955.

Park, J., & Stoel, L. (2005). Effect of brand familiarity, experience and information on online

apparel purchase. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, *33*(2), 148-160.

Song, K., Fiore, A. M., & Park, J. (2007). Telepresence and fantasy in online apparel shopping

experience. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, *11*(4), 553-570.

Sorce, P., Perotti, V., & Widrick, S. (2005). Attitude and age differences in online buying. *International*

*Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, *33*(2), 122-132.

Wolfinbarger, M., & Gilly, M. C. (2001). Shopping online for freedom, control, and

fun. *California Management Review*, *43*(2), 34-55.