The Role of Web Atmospherics and Consumers Emotions
In Online Fashion Shopping Experiences

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*Later stage doctoral research

1.   The conceptual domain (the central ideas, concepts, frameworks, conceptual models, theories, etc of the research)

This research explores and conceptualises the overall shopping experience as lived by online fashion shoppers. Theoretical background of the research has its roots from Environmental Psychology; it builds on the stimuli-response relations but is employed in the modern concept of 'FASHIONSCAPE' i.e. the online fashion shopping environment. Additionally, the research draws upon theories of emotion and cognition and their influential role on the shopping experience.

2.   The methodological domain (including some or all of the following: method(s) for making observations or manipulating variables, research design, research philosophy, underlying assumptions about knowledge)

Believing that the best person to educate us about consumers are consumers themselves, the research adopted George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory and employed the Repertory Grid technique to gain a deeper understanding of the overall shopping experience and the emotions that underpin observable behaviour. Additionally, the research adopts Pragmatism and believes in multiple realities and an openness and acceptance of both objective and subjective realities. Driven by actions and useful truth, the research also used screen recorded videos to capture real life online shopping experiences.

3.   The substantive domain (covering the context in which the research will take place: behaviours in temporal/ spatial/ situational contexts (events), patterns of events, real world systems and phenomena)

The research studies the shopping experience that online fashion shoppers experience when visiting apparel websites. It captures live experiences and it uses consumer-centric approach to understanding how those shoppers interpret their experiences using their own words. The research is inspired by an industrial dilemma which is the web atmosphere which is extra critical in Fashion. Various elements of the apparel web atmosphere are studied in details.

Abstract

This research explores and conceptualises the overall shopping experience as lived by fashion shoppers. Believing that the best person to educate us about consumers are consumers themselves, the research adopted George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory and employed the Repertory Grid technique to gain a deeper understanding of the overall shopping experience and the emotions that underpin observable behaviour. Moreover, screen recorded videos were carried out, using Camtasia software, to capture how consumers interact with web atmospherics or what this research terms as the "FASHIONSCAPE". Both qualitative and quantitative analyses are being carried out and the main outcome shows a uniqueness in the nature of online fashion shopping, high quality digital zooming/ 3D images and catwalk videos are two main influential factors on the buying decision. The effect of social media integration, customer reviews, and chat with advisers is varying (analysis is still being carried out). Moreover, the initial result shows that emotions form the basis of observable behaviour. However, it was clear that emotions are the deepest constructs that consumers form after laddering down (asking how and in what way questions).

Keywords: Online Fashion Shopping Experience, Repertory Grid, Videos, Shopping Environment and Web atmospherics

Introduction

Fashion shopping is not 'simply limited to the spending of money on products; rather, shopping is also an important socializing and engaging exercise that provides opportunities to see and be with others' (Kang, 2009, p. 1). The dramatic shift of social fashion shopping to a screen-and-keyboard experience imposes high importance on the online environment in which the shopping experience occurs. Due to the unique nature of fashion, the online shopping environment becomes central to a successful experience. The importance of product specific atmospherics is undeniable in online fashion shopping environments due to the nature of fashion items and the need to visualise fashion items behind screens. The inability to 'try before you buy' and the lack of human interactions pose a challenge in Fashion Marketing. Therefore, often scholars used product presentation elements such as product images, zooming and 3D views, information on sizing and materials as well as web design, layout, etc as elements of the online shopping environment (Ha, Kwon, & Lennon, 2007; Kang & Park-Poaps, 2010; H. Kim & Lennon, 2010; Wang, Hernandez, & Minor, 2010).

In Marketing Research, Kotler (1973) initially referred to the importance of environmental atmospherics as a marketing tool. Then, the concept of the surrounding retail environment was further developed as Bitner coined the term 'servicescape', defined as 'All of the objective physical factors that can be controlled by the firm to enhance (or constrain) employee and customer actions' (Bitner, 1992, p. 65); suggesting that human beings within the service interaction are affected by the surrounding physical environment. Later definitions of servicescape included non-physical components called social factors; concluding that servicescape is comprised of ambient factors, design factors and social factors (Ezeh & Harris, 2007)

Studying the effect of the environment on human behaviour has its roots in Psychology. The stimulus-response psychology is one of the earliest endeavours to studying the effect of the environment on human beings. Lazarus (1998, p. xvii) criticized this perspective by arguing that 'a person in this interchange is a passive creature, reacting to an environment that stimulates him or her, and that person's influence on the environment is ignored'. Later, scholars suggested that one missing link in this relation is that human beings differ from machines in developing 'organismic' reactions (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Hence, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R model) suggested that when a person is exposed to external stimuli, 'inner organism changes' precede behavioural responses.

The S-O-R has dominated consumer behaviour literature and has been widely employed in marketing studies (Arora, 1982; Buckley, 1991; Donovan John & Robert, 1994). The influence of the buying environment on customers' expectations, cognition and emotion has been studied using the S-O-R framework (Aubert-Gamet, 1997; Bitner, 1992; Reimer & Kuehn, 2005). Moreover, as the internet became a major or complementary sales channel for many retailers, research on the online buying environment has emerged e.g. (Demangeot & Broderick, 2007; Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001; Éthier, Hadaya, Talbot, & Cadieux, 2006; Lee, Kim, & Fiore, 2010)

Several endeavours were made to adapt the S-O-R in an online shopping context. Eroglu, et al. (2001) suggested that there is a need to systematically develop a comprehensive taxonomy of online atmospheric cues and to identify their major dimensions; similarly to what has been done within the traditional retail store environment. Then, it was further modified by Sautter, et al. (2004) by integrating the effect of dual environments in this context; the website environment and the environment in which the human-computer interaction takes place. (Laroche, 2009) highlighted the importance of incorporating emotional responses to initial website exposure and identifying their relationships with other variables in a model of online

consumer behaviour, taking into account product intangibility factors. Additionally, Kawaf and Tagg (2012) called for a new perspective on the interactions between shoppers and the online shopping environment; especially that the S-O-R falls short of providing a comprehensive view of the effect of the human body on the environment (Lazarus, 1998) and on the shopping experience itself.

Instead of focusing on the S-O-R framework as a medium of studying the shopping experience, the following will provide a different way of understanding this experience as constructed by consumers.

Online Fashion Shopping: Environment and Experience

As abovementioned, taking fashion to the online market is a dramatic shift in this social experience. This emphasises the importance of contemporary technologies in advancing the online shopping environment for apparel sites. Hence, the social dimension of fashion shopping might be met through technology. Kang (2009, p. 1) comments 'Given contemporary advances in fashion retail systems and information technologies, social shopping experiences have become even more complex and complicated'. Indeed, contemporary technologies could mark a new era of online fashion shopping only if it meets consumer's needs and offers ways to overcome the obstacles to online shopping.

Lee, Kim, and Fiore (2010) suggested that with regards to fashion shopping, image interactivity i.e. image zooming and 360 degree rotation increase shopping enjoyment and reduce perceived risk toward the online retailer. Kim and Lennon (2010) investigated the influence of further product presentation features such as the use of a model (as opposed to flat display) and colour swapping on clothing in addition to image zooming. Indeed, online product presentation was suggested to be the most important factor in the context of online apparel stores (Ha, et al., 2007).

In addition to online product presentation, many websites nowadays include new features that nurture the social dimension of online fashion shopping as in Facebook groups and pages, and the ability to like an item or to share an outfit on one's own timeline. As a result, increasing attention in research is being paid to the significance of social network sites, virtual communities (Chan & Li, 2009; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004; Flavián & Guinalíu, 2005) and customer reviews forum (J. Kim & Gupta, 2011). Moreover, few websites started to employ a 'chat with advisor' facility which offers the opportunity to speak to an advisor as in offline stores. On this, Holzwarth, Janiszewski, and Neumann (2006) suggested that avatar- a pictorial representation of a human in a chat environment- can enhance the effectiveness of a Web-based sales channel. That is, having the choice to chat with an advisor may result in a more successful apparel websites which will be evaluated in the analysis section of this paper. Research suggests that online environmental stimuli or web atmospherics influence affective and cognitive online shopping experience e.g. (Lee, et al., 2010). This perspective is the essence of 'organism' in the S-O-R model and is defined by Chang and Chen (2008,p. 820) as 'cognitive and affective intermediary states and processes that mediate the relationships between the stimulus and the individual's responses'. However, to deepen understanding of affective and cognitive experiences, a clear distinction should be made around the meanings of often interrelated words in the literature; these are affect, emotion and cognition (Kawaf & Tagg, 2012). Both emotion and affect are thought to arise as a result of mental states or evaluative processes (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Éthier, et al., 2006). However, Cohen, et al. (2008, p. 3) reserve the term 'affect' to describe an internal feeling state, differentiate it from mood by illustrating 'One's explicit or implicit 'liking' for some object, person, or position is viewed as an evaluative judgment rather than an internal feeling state'.

A growing body of literature is focused on measuring emotions (Laros & Steenkamp, 2005; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), affective or cognitive experiences (Lee, et al., 2010; López & Ruiz, 2010; Park, Stoel, & Lennon, 2008). Various measurements of emotions are used in consumer research such as the Pleasure-Arousal-Dominance 'PAD' model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), Positive Affect Negative Affect Scale 'PANAS' (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), Consumption-related Emotion Set 'CES' (Richins, 1997), or using facial expressions (Ekman, 1992). All of those scales are based on measuring particular emotional words that are previously set to which the respondents are required to rate or show an agreement or disagreement to. However, due to the ambiguous nature of emotions which was referred to by Fehr and Russell (1984) as 'everyone knows what emotion is until asked to give a definition'. Often, cconsumers do not easily talk about emotions either because they are unaware of them or because they cannot define them. Additionally, emotion scales are usually confusing as the respondent is asked to rate specific wordings based on their shopping experiences and often these words are similar or unrelated to the particular experience. Moreover, because fashion shopping behaviour is deeply rooted in emotional and psychological motivations (Jackson & Shaw, 2009; Kang & Park-Poaps, 2010), this research is focused more on the consumers inner construing system and is using consumers own words and constructs to formulate the bigger image of the online shopping experience.

Research Philosophy and Methodology

The research's philosophical stances are based on the paradigm of 'Pragmatism' which is a practical approach that devote an openness to multiple realities (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009) and seek truth that is useful and practical and offers methodological flexibility (Elkjaer & Simpson, 2010). The researcher is also inspired by Personal Construct Theory (Kelly, 1955) which is describes as 'a theory of man's personal inquiry – a psychology of the human quest' (Bannister, 1970). Personal Construct Theory (PCT) was developed in response to the need for a humanistic approach and a theory that accounts for the role of the person in the study, a comprehensive theory that can account for the person as a whole, a person who is capable of learning through their experiences and constructions of the world (Carroll & Carroll, 1981). Kelly described personal construct psychology as This perspective views 'man is a scientist' as the expert on his own experiences and feelings (Bannister & Fransella, 1986). PCT offers an alternative to the (emotion vs. cognition) perspective and work as a bridge between Emotion and cognition, hence it does not pay too much attention to the differences between emotion and cognition, instead Kelly seemed to have viewed it as a process in which cognitive elements of an experience leads onto higher order constructs of emotions (Yassim, 2011).

In order to unveil a person's constructs Kelly developed the repertory grid technique to help him unveil his constructs. Every grid consists of four components; topic, elements, constructs and ratings (Jankowicz, 2005). In any piece of research, the topic of the grid must be agreed first, then a set of elements are defined either by negotiation between the interviewer and the interviewee or by supplying them from either the interviewer or the interviewee. Each of these methods has its own positives and negatives and it should be decided in light on the research matter. Constructs are then elicited using different 'triad' comparisons of the elements, then ratings of the constructs against elements are done (Jankowicz, 2005).

Method

Using the repertory grid technique, interviews with 17 online fashion shoppers resulted in 17 repertory grids. Each gird consisted of 10 web characteristic elements chosen by negotiation

with the interviewee. Most popular elements are; search facilities, customer reviews, product image zooming and 3D, written product information, webpage layout, catwalk videos, virtual fitting rooms, chat with an advisor, model size and social network pages. Each element is written on a card then, using triads, three cards are randomly chosen and the following, '*looking at these three cards, can you think of one thing that two of these cards have in common that is different from the third in terms of how they make you feel*?', is asked. The common factor represents the emergent pole of the construct whereas the opposing factor represents the implicit pole, e.g. (Emergent: Happy-Implicit: Frustrated). The construct is then used as a 5-point scale to rate all existing elements against it. See appendix 1 for a sample grid. Moreover, Laddering and pyramiding (Jankowicz, 2005) are techniques that were also used to dig deeper in an interviewee's construing system either to reach deeper meaning or to get to a more generic level of constructs.

Following grid interviews, screen recorded videos were captured using Camtasia software to record screen movements on fashion websites. Participants were asked to demonstrate a real life shopping experience the way they usually do in reality; they had the freedom to choose the website(s) they want to shop on and whether they would like to open their emails/Facebook/Twitter accounts or any other website they usually use when shopping online. Participants were asked to comment, using a headset, on what they are seeing and why they are choosing or discarding items or websites. The length of most videos is between five and ten minutes, they provide a great amount of data to the research because it is participant specific and reflects everyone's special way of shopping online. For instance, some participants start their shopping from their preferred websites whereas others start from a search engine such as Google to find specific fashion items.

As this research is consumer centric, it was important to find a way in which actual behaviour is observed. However, since the matter of the research is online shopping it is often impossible to observe online shopping behaviour therefore screen recorded videos are deemed important in this research.

Analysis

'Grids are like people. They come in many shapes and sizes, they ask questions and give answers, they can be studied as a group or individually, on one occasion or successively over time, and they can be used well or distorted out of all recognition' (Fransella et al., 2004, p. xi).

Analysis that is used in this paper was done in three stages; process analysis, eye-ball analysis and content analysis (Jankowicz, 2003). Process analysis focuses on the process of the interview in which the grids are generated in order to overcome any obstacles or issues that may confuse the interviewee or be overtiring. Eye-ball analysis is done to quickly scan the grid to confirm obvious patterns in numbers or words. Process and eye-ball analyses showed that most emotional constructs were not elicited at the first triadic go. Participants were more likely to describe elements initially, such as (Necessity-Luxury). Hence, the laddering technique (asking why and how questions) was used to dig deeper into the construing system of the interviewee. When laddering used, the participant was able to provide more behavioural and emotional constructs. The necessity-luxury example had then elicited (Risk free-High risk purchase decision) construct, which subsequently was described by the interviewee as making them (Happy-frustrated).

Content analysis of the grids helps better understand the shopping environment from consumers' point of view. This is what can be referred to as the 'FASHIONSCAPE' based on
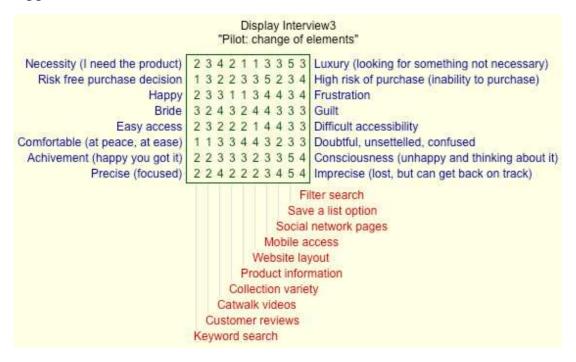
the personal attributions of the elements of the grids. Analysis of the ten most used elements shows that product image zooming and 3D is essential and expected to be on apparel websites as a minimum because, they help with visualising and imagining the products and they encourage a buying decision. It was noted that some female participants were hesitant about product images on very slim models as this is put their confidence at risk when comparing their figures to the model's one. Similarly, Catwalk videos encourage the shoppers to buy and help make the shopping experience closer to real life. However, catwalk videos, for most, are not essential and are seen as a nice extra that is enjoyable and make them feel happy and confident. Web layout and search facilities are very important and often taken for granted, they influence shoppers' decision to visit websites more often. It is worthy to note that poor layout and bad search facilities seem to have a negative effect on consumers that is much greater than the positive effect high quality layouts and search facilities give.

Product information is thought to be essential and helps make things clear and certain, and has an effect on trust, confidence and perceived risk. Additionally, detailed and reliable product information seems to motivate consumers and encourage them to buy. Controversially, customer reviews are seen as confusing and unreliable. Most participants pointed out they either don't care about customer reviews and do not pay much attention to them or that they find them confusing and contradicting. Some thought that they can leave them anxious about their purchase decisions depending on whether the reviews are in their favour or not. Moreover, the majority do not see how social network pages could be important or beneficial to their shopping experience. On the other hand, most online shoppers liked the idea of virtual fitting rooms and 'chat with advisor' facilities but most did not know they existed. Virtual fitting rooms are thought to make the shopping experience more enjoyable and closer to real life, and it makes customers more likely to spend time on websites. Finally, most participants preferred not to use a chat with advisor facility although many pointed out it can be very useful and help make things clearer and put them at ease.

Analysis of the constructs elicited from the grids offers a comprehensive view on the online fashion shopping experience. This new perspective divided constructs into five categories. These are (a) *Situational constructs* which relate to the situation in which the online shopping experience is taking place. For instance if the shopper is looking for a necessary product, their shopping experience and the way they are affected by web atmospherics is totally different from when they are in a luxurious situation looking for products that are not necessary or urgent. (b) *Elements-related constructs*; these are constructs that offers a description of web atmospherics such as (a bonus—a necessity). Looking at the rating for such a construct suggest that customers' expectations of the quality of the website is extremely high as most elements are perceived as a necessity and their absence result in negative experience. (c) *Risk, certainty and confidence constructs*; it is apparent that this is a main issue of concern for almost all online shoppers. However, the grids suggest that more experienced shoppers are less affected by this category of constructs. (d) *Emotional constructs*; it is noticeable that customers possess more negative than positive emotions. For instance, happy has eight negative phrases as opposing poles. Hence, as Bannister and Fransella (1986) suggested, the idea of Kelly's (emergent—implicit) constructs helps us understand the meaning of a person's own construing system. Therefore, to differentiate what's meant by 'happy' as opposed to 'frustrated', 'concerned', 'focused' or 'confused'. This confirms the importance of studying each type of emotions separately (Griskevicius, Shiota, & Nowlis, 2010). Finally, (d) *Behavioural constructs;* are mainly (encourage me to buy—put me off) in addition to buying more, looking for alternatives and not coming back. This is consistent with the approach-avoidance theory of behaviour (Aubert-Gamet, 1997; Eroglu, et al., 2001; Ezeh & Harris, 2007).

Appendices

Appendix 1

Display Interview3
"Pilot: change of elements"

Necessity (I need the product)	2 3 4 2 1 1 3 3 5 3	Luxury (looking for something not necessary)
Risk free purchase decision	1 3 2 2 3 3 5 2 3 4	High risk of purchase (inability to purchase)
Happy	2 3 3 1 1 3 4 4 3 4	Frustration
Bride	3 2 4 3 2 4 4 3 3 3	Guilt
Easy access	2 3 2 2 2 1 4 4 3 3	Difficult accessibility
Comfortable (at peace, at ease)	1 1 3 3 4 4 3 2 3 3	Doubtful, unsettelled, confused
Achivement (happy you got it)	2 2 3 3 3 2 3 3 5 4	Consciousness (unhappy and thinking about it)
Precise (focused)	2 2 4 2 2 2 3 4 5 4	Imprecise (lost, but can get back on track)

Filter search
Save a list option
Social network pages
Mobile access
Website layout
Product information
Collection variety
Catwalk videos
Customer reviews
Keyword search

Appendix 2

Grid design

1. Ask the participant to write elements on cards (web characteristics)
2. Show the pre-defined set of elements to the participant.
3. Negotiate the 10 elements that both the researcher and the participant are happy to include in the grid.
4. Ask the participant to pick three cards randomly
5. Ask the participant the following: 'looking at these three cards, can you think of one thing that two of these cards have in common that is different from the third in terms of how they make you feel?'
6. Write the emergent/opposing poles of the construct
7. Ask the participant to give ratings based on a 5 point scale (constructs from step 6)
8. Start laddering down by asking, how/why/in which way questions.
9. Keep laddering and write all constructs until the participant has nothing new to say.
10. Ask the participant to provide ratings for the new constructs.
11. Put the used three cards aside and repeat steps 4 to 10

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