Disrupting the fashion retail journey: social media and GenZ fashion consumption

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Disrupting the fashion retail journey: Social media and GenZ’s fashion consumption

Abstract

Purpose
The aim of this paper is to assess the use of social media by Gen Z consumers and the ways they impact on and re-shape their fashion consumption journey. This generational approach uses the lens of uses and gratifications theory (UGT) to explore the customer fashion retail journey from the perspective of the Gen Z consumer.

Design/methodology/approach
The research uses an exploratory approach in response to the relative lack of research into GenZ consumers combined with a need to understand shopping journeys. Mixed methods were used with a first phase of interviews followed by a survey of 102 Gen Z students recruited online in the UK during the Covid19 pandemic.

Findings
The study found that GenZ users of social media for shopping sought gratification from experiences derived from social relationships, entertainment and information. The need for immediate gratification was found in new information and meeting new people to maintain social relationships, learn about products and inform the shopping journey. Further, the research supported the importance of visual images in the affective gratification of shopping needs. Resale sites on social media were favoured for their low prices, information about previously owned fashion items and the opportunity to exercise sustainable fashion choices.

Originality/value
The research advances understanding of fashion shopping journeys through social media and online resale sites. It demonstrates that younger consumers, GenZ, shop through the gratification of experiences informed by their social networks and wider contacts. The linear stages of pre to post-purchase shopping are merged and looped as they exchange information about their shopping journey, from information gathering to post-purchase comments. The role of the brand to these knowledgeable consumers conducting their own resale trade, is to facilitate access to and information about their products,

Keywords GenZ, social media, shopping journeys, experience, gratifications.

Paper type Research paper
Introduction

Recent studies have demonstrated the rapid advances in digital retail, networked technology and social media and their negotiated influence on shopping behaviour, largely from a retailer and brand management perspective (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Souiden et al., 2019; Appel et al., 2020; Hoyer et al., 2020; Roggeveen et al., 2020). This has led to calls for further research into shopping journeys in terms of consumer-led experiences when interacting with brands enabled by blending of social and technology tools that provide consumers with new online shopping opportunities (Grewal et al., 2020) and experiences given the challenges and opportunities that these retail encounters entail.

One group of consumers that has grown up and been socialised under the influence of digital technologies and utilise social media for a range of functional and emotional purposes in everyday life is GenZ. This demographic is increasingly using online resale sites such as Vinted and Depop as a form of collaborative consumption in co-producing consumption experiences (Botsman and Rogers, 2010) by monetising their skills and unused resources based on peer-to-peer exchange of owned goods. The aim of this paper is to assess the retail use of social media sites by Gen Z consumers and the ways in which these digital spaces impact on and re-shape fashion consumption journeys (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010). This generational approach uses the lens of the cognitive and affective uses and gratifications theory (UGT) (Katz & Gurevitch, 1973) to explore the online needs of the consumer and the gratifications gained when using social media from the perspective of the Gen Z online consumer. The enhanced use of digital media by this group of consumers is contextualised by the disruptive influence of Covid-19 on physical retail sites, which resulted in a series of lockdowns and closures at different times during 2020-21 and boosted online retail activity.

Literature Review

Retailers and consumers use both digital and offline channels for fashion sales and purchasing as part of the experiential retail journey, through which they are empowered to select and individualise pathways to achieve their objectives driven by cognitive, affective and behavioural considerations. The adoption of social media has contributed to this complexity by facilitating engagement with influencers, friends and virtual employees, and in the fashion industry, in particular, image uploading, editing and sharing as consumers shopping online are more inclined to read reviews, seek posts by influencers, engage with friends, virtual employees, or a chatbot (Grewal et al., 2020). In addition, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting accelerated dependency on online retail may have contributed to long-term cognitive, affective and behavioural shifts in consumers that will continue to impact buying patterns, psychographic behaviours and other marketing activities (Zwanka and Buff, 2021).

Social media can be defined from a number of perspectives, as platforms, channels and social environments, or more holistically as an ecosystem of a ‘diverse and complex set of behaviours, interactions, and exchanges involving various kinds of interconnected actors’ (Appel et al., 2020: 80). From a consumer perspective, these socially networked, mediated sites can enhance
and contribute to heightened shopping experiences, hedonism and an expectation of hybrid online and in-person offerings among users that are manifested in information sharing, social interaction and real-time access to news and infotainment content (Zwanka and Buff, 2021). Pantano and Gandini (2018) stated that the shopping experience of younger consumers has shifted from a conventional store-based experience to a “networked experience” empowered by social media and smartphone technologies. For businesses, social media sites have facilitated e-commerce and more specifically created a context for social commerce, where social and commercial activities are combined (Esmaeili and Hashemi, 2019). Consequently, the digital environment has become integral to the functioning of everyday life (Dunas and Vartanov, 2020), a process heightened by physical restrictions during Covid-19 lockdowns (Statista, 2021), in which the interconnectivity of the digital ecosystem has taken on a more significant role in the ways that consumers experience both selling and purchasing decisions (Mintel, 2021).

GenZ

One important, yet under-researched group of ‘tech-native’ consumers, are Generation Z (GenZ) who were born between 1995-2005 (Dimock 2019; Fry and Parker 2018; Priporas et al. 2017). Their consumption characteristics are fundamentally defined by the presence of digital technology, including smartphones, wifi and computer games, throughout their lives (Smith 2019). Gen Z spend more time online than any other demographic sector and actively contribute to consumption conversations, notably via mobile communication devices, for a range of functional purposes and social gratifications including shopping (Priporas et al. 2017; Howe and Strauss, 2009). Their presence is increasingly evident in emerging forms of exchange and consumption, specifically in the peer to peer (P2P), collaborative, sharing economy (Patel 2017; Kim 2019; Choi and He 2019) and in how they value non-ownership and possession of previously used objects (Hamari et al. 2016). These characteristics contribute to consumption experiences in which social media usage occupies a central role whereby shopping journeys are more complex, non-linear and less well defined.

These consumers have had a high level of autonomy from a young age and their access to online information makes them knowledgeable about brands (Bassiouni and Hackley, 2014). By contrast with earlier generations, GenZ are typified by their artisanal activities, use of local-origin stories and curatorial ability with their possessions which supports their identity as seekers-out of unique products and services (Goldring and Azab, 2021). As consumers in a digital world, GenZ are particularly concerned with ‘influence’ to support and guide them, from trusted peers and friends but also online influencers: influence in this context merges functional, cognitive and affective behaviours (Childers et al., 2001).

However, there is relatively little academic research that specifically on GenZ’s use of digital skills and brand knowledge for consumption practices, although industry reports provide insights into their importance for retail processes (Patel 2017; Fromm 2018, McKinsey, 2020). Further, the research focus has tended to centre on consumers not sellers, so sometimes in this social context, sellers are also users. One way Gen Z consumers demonstrate their autonomy,
is through their propensity to buy, sell and re-sell at will and largely on their own terms through online exchange sites, including Depop, Poshmark and Vinted (Hoffower, 2021). These networked sites provide agency, empowerment and lucrative, assured income for their resell hustle. In this sense they are both consumers and ‘prosumers’ (Kotler, 1986) or digital prosumers (Ritzer et al., 2010) operating in and driving collaborative consumption communities. Representing a global challenge to traditional business models and associated market regulatory structures, collaborative consumption markets they are “scalable, non geographically bound, and enduring platforms that operate synergistically with traditional marketplaces” (Chalmers et al., 2013). They are also more dynamic and fluid than the established buyer-seller dyad and operate in a triadic format (Benoit et al. 2017), comprising the interdependent actors of buyers and sellers and the digital platform provider all involved in the co-production of the consumption experience.

First, these mediated sites enable consumers to create and curate their own “divided wardrobe” comprising a mix of items sourced from resale or rented vendors. Secondly, they make a significant potential contribution to the circular fashion economy (Markova et al. 2017) through purchasing pre-owned items and reselling past purchases (Laitala, 2014). Heightened social media consumption forms a living environment for Gen Z, possessing the qualities and characteristics, not merely of the mediated channel itself, but also of the social space, denoting different types of interactions with different platforms (Dunas and Vartanov, 2020). This retail community seeks pleasure from sourcing a style or look, for example, original 1970s or 1980s clothing and accessories, beyond a specific brand that is unique and individual, which is intrinsic to the value of the sartorial ‘find’ in a given transaction.

The combination of information gathering, social connection, pleasure seeking and commercial activity on social media and online exchange sites highlights the importance of experiences for the GenZ consumer. Experience is conceptualized as consumption generating hedonic and utilitarian value that exists as a multidimensional construct in a commercial context involving the customer’s cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical responses to a retailer (Verhoef et al., 2016). It involves a combination of products, environment and activities and also communication and distribution channels to bring about the experience. Consumer immersion in an experience takes place when this context is enclosed, secure, and thematized (Carù and Cova, 2006; Bèzes, 2019). Moreover, an experience is not dependent on brand perception, because the experience does not have to be part of a motivational state (Morrison and Crane 2017). Therefore, even if consumers are not familiar with a brand or if the item is unbranded, unlabelled or vintage, it is still possible to have a distinctive experience as a customer, because the essence or aesthetic form determines how the brand-related stimuli is transmitted (Morrison and Crane, 2017) and decoded. The power of these stimuli varies, as some brands can convey a more dynamic experience while others create a more sophisticated experience (Brun et al., 2017). The accessibility of fashion brands and items has come to play a significant role in GenZ’s lives as individual and collective identity markers (Samala and Singh, 2019). While GenZ consumers identify with identifiable brands Nike or Converse and are brand loyal, the brand can also be supplementary to the product itself: its specific look or
name and could be immaterial when making an unbranded or vintage purchase of an unfamiliar brand.

In the context of consumer purchase experiences, feelings and emotions play a critical role in predisposing consumers to purchase goods (Aydinli et al., 2017). Researchers have discovered psychological impacts on the consumer journey and social experiences through cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial and cultural encounters (Shavitt and Barnes, 2020; Lemon and Peter, 2016). However, affective aspects are found infused throughout a shopping experience (Iglesias et al., 2011; Brun et al., 2017) in three salient aspects: product search and identification; engagement and/or purchase; and consumption (Brakus et al., 2009; Hoyer et al., 2020). The prosumer experiences from these stages can be interlinked, so that past experiences impact current and future experiences, whereby the experiences of today become the past experiences for tomorrow (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020), a process where consumers may seemingly jump from the pre-purchase to post-purchase stage. Yet, this shopping process is less well understood in the context of younger consumers and their social media motivations and usages in the shopping journey.

Theoretical framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) originated in studies of mass media behaviour, intent on understanding consumer motivations and the related gratifications they achieved from mass mediated consumption processes (Katz and Gurevitch 1973; Katz et al., 1974). Use of media is selective and motivated by an awareness of personal and functional needs that are a combination of psychological, sociological and environmental conditions (Bae, 2018) such as personal identity or escapism, while gratifications refer to expectations about the content formed in advance of using the medium such as the affordances of socialisation or the benefits gained from information-seeking. Katz (1973) categorises needs in five groupings, cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and escape. According to UGT, people tend to be motivated to use any mass medium by how much they rely on it (Galloway and Meek, 1981), and how well it satisfies their needs (Boudkouss and Djelassi, 2020; Lichtenstein and Rosenfeld, 1983), or fulfils unsatisfied needs by using particular media (Raschnaubel, 2018). Gratifications obtained refer to the satisfaction obtained from using something (Palmgreen et al., 1980), and the difference between gratifications sought and those obtained can demonstrate the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction experienced by individual users (Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1979; Palmgreen et al., 1980; Quan-Haase and Young, 2010).

Online connectivity has created new forms of media and the use of personal devices has been linked to individuals’ motivations to use the Internet and particular types of mediated communication for communication and interactive purposes that relate to the fulfillment of gratifications such as social identity, interpersonal communication, parasocial interaction, companionship, escape, entertainment, and surveillance (Ruggiero, 2009). Preference patterns by people regarding new media technology, including social media, have been acknowledged as part of media effects research that is linked to UGT (Holwey, 2019; Ruggiero, 2009). For this reason, UGT has been employed in many digital media and communication technology
studies (Hui-Yi and Ling-Yin, 2018; Whiting and Williams, 2013), including mobile device adoption (Joo and Sang, 2013), social media usage and social commerce. Different types of SM demonstrate distinctive user gratification needs and new gratifications to explain, in part how individuals use different types of social media (Ruggiero, 2002; Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). Previous studies using UGT have posited that frequent users of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat derive different gratifications from their use, which are passing time, showing affection, following fashion, sharing problems, demonstrating sociability and improving social knowledge (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), and also have different impacts on brand community related outcomes: identification, engagement, commitment, and membership intention (Phua et al., 2017).

Shopping motivations are primarily utilitarian, relating to price and function and hedonic, which includes adventure, gratification, role, value, social, and idea shopping motivations (Childers et al., 2001; Kim, 2006; Babin et al., 1994; Arnold and Reynolds 2003). Cai and Wohn (2019) found gratifications from online shopping domains with dimensions related to social media and social live streaming services. Research on live streaming commerce identified the factors of consumer motivations through UGT and found that the gratifications of social presence and enjoyment are associated with the symbolic value and hedonic value of consumers’ social shopping experiences (Athwal et al., 2019; Cai and Wohn, 2019; Joines et al., 2003; Wongkitrungrueng et al., 2020). Intention to engage in social commerce is positively influenced by accessing information quality, cool new trends, and perceived enjoyment (Sharma and Crossler, 2014). However, combining Gen Z consumer behaviour and related gratifications have not been examined in existing social media and social commerce research. This study adopted UGT and consumer experience approaches to understand GenZ consumers’ motivations and intentions in social commerce. The central proposition of positioning people to be more in control of the medium they are using helps explain how individual consumers anticipate what social media can deliver to gratify their needs (Hui-Yi and Ling-Yin, 2015; Langlotz et al., 2014; Raacke and Raacke, 2008; Ruggiero, 2000) and how that might shape the consumer journey.

Studies have shown that a holistic experience is expected by the customer regardless of how and where it is accessed in the customer journey (Colombi et al., 2018; Foroudi et al., 2018; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Prentice et al., 2019). In addition, the sense of immersion in an experience is contextualized by the distance of the consumer from a combination of products, environment, and activities (Bèzes, 2019; Carù and Cova, 2006). Social commerce, through video-sharing and livestreaming social networking sites (SNS) could enhance retail experience by fulfilling the gratification needs of Gen Z consumers during periods of physical retail inaccessibility. In particular, the shoppable livestream experiences offered by SNS, especially through TikTok, are attractive to GenZ consumers as they feature product information, communication quality, enjoyment and social presence (Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut, 2020). The experience is connected to their ability to co-create a product, for example, on Depop’s site, there is a section encouraging sellers to engage contribute to ‘being the brand’. In this way, users are looking at the brands and popular sellers at the same time, with the potential to become a branded prosumer in their own right. Co-engagement experience can
connect with and be analysed by applying UGT, but there is little in previous research about the gratification of needs for co-creation and co-engagement in online retail settings.

Two research questions arise from this review of the literature. First, how do socially evolving social media (SM) behaviours among GenZ on resale fashion sites contribute to a different retail structure and consumer interaction, recognising the saliency of influence, collaboration and ownership from a consumer/prosumer perspective? Secondly, what motivating uses (cognitive information seeking and purchasing) and gratifications (emotive, aesthetic, social and entertaining) are embedded in GenZ’s collaborative selling and consumption or prosumption experiences?

Methodology

The research was undertaken as an exploratory project using a mixed methods approach. The choice of an exploratory design is explained by the relative lack of earlier research in the field of GenZ consumption, but it also responded to the need to develop new knowledge about emerging generational shopping journeys. An initial, qualitative pilot study, aimed to achieve a deeper understanding of consumer feelings and perceptions about respondents’ needs from social media online shopping journeys (Hammersley, 2011). At this stage, in-depth interviews were undertaken to scope the problem using twenty-three unstructured questions derived from consumer behavioural literature (Creswell, 2001). The first group of questions used a UGT framework to explore respondents’ motivations when employing social media for social use, for example connecting with friends, for information seeking and entertainment. A second group of questions elicited responses about the respondent’s content curation, connection with brands and personal commercial activity on social media. Due to Covid-19 restrictions the number of participants was limited and six students were selected from an online convenience sample and interviewed online, for around 45 minutes. The qualitative content was coded and analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in three main themes of social media usage motivation, keeping in contact “being up to date” and a nexus of information-entertainment.

The second stage of the data collection was undertaken using an agile survey to develop constructs in the use and gratification of social media combined with experiences of social media in the shopping journey. The online survey used a questionnaire with items derived from previous research (Katz and Gurevitch, 1973; Quan-Haase and Young, 2010) which combined UGT with Whiting and Williams’s (2013) experiential value of social media applied to digital consumption and insights from the first stage interviews. The questionnaire was designed with seven categories of gratifications: social interaction; information seeking; to pass time; entertainment; relaxation; communicatory utility; and convenience utility (Whiting and Whiting, 2013). In each category, items were framed around the consumption practices and gratifications expected from shopping with social media, addressing social media usage, needs gratifications, resale market platform, and social media and shopping journey. The question types used were multiple choice and used a 5 point Likert scale, with a total of twenty-seven questions. The questionnaire was constructed in googleforms and distributed via online platforms including email and social media. Responses were received from 102...
postgraduate level students of whom, 60% of respondents were female, 30% male with the remaining percentage unrecorded. The analysis, in alignment with a mixed research methods approach, was undertaken using univariate statistics to summarise the findings.

Findings

The research confirmed that mobile phones are the most popular device used to access social media sites, by 93% of respondents, followed by laptops and tablets. The low usage of tablets may reflect their size and capability, as they fall between the portability of mobile phones and the large screen accessibility of laptops. For a shopping journey, social media is considered to be a key part of the interview and survey respondents’ everyday lives. Instagram is the most used platform (99%), followed by Facebook (33%) and YouTube (32%). However, these platforms can serve different functions and the motivations to use them and gratifications arising from them varies by platform. Interview respondents were able to differentiate their preferences for different social media usage and the ability to use sites for a combination of purposes. While Instagram was the most popular platform for information gathering, all have multiple uses that often combine information seeking, chat and entertainment. This diversity contributed to the emergence of a temporal theme, evident in a need for immediate gratification, as one respondent explained: “YouTube and TikTok are there to ‘keep me busy’” and to stop the timelessness of boredom setting in. Immediacy was an appealing feature of Snapchat while Twitter was criticised for “mindless scrolling” and the Depop resale site could be overwhelmingly time-consuming to navigate. But temporality was also evident in the users’ changing perceptions over time of different media and their usefulness. Facebook was used for keeping in touch with family, posting events and was seen to be more popular with ‘older people’ as it lacked the immediacy of engagement and multimodal aspects of still and moving images, unlike Instagram or Tik Tok, the more preferred social media platforms.

The survey findings show that the most important uses and gratifications exhibited by GenZ consumers in using social media sites could be categorised into three themes, social connectivity (4.3), entertainment (4.17) and knowledge acquisition (3.77). These were supported by the interview findings where respondents sought gratification from social and pleasure-seeking alongside useful information seeking, through social media engagement. In considering how affective gratifications are sought from social media content, text has long been replaced by still and moving image as the prevalent form of multi-modal communication. The findings showed that still image is the most used, (4.17), followed by moving image (4.09) and text (3.38). The highest affective gratification sought from the use of such images reported by both survey and interview respondents was the ability to access and post aesthetically pleasing, and in some cases inspiring pictures that could be used to access new, upcoming or sustainable designers or an individual’s own fashion and accessory collection or styled “look.”

Aesthetics, in the classical tradition, is founded on the viewer’s seeing and gaining of insights from an object or a source and the correspondence between the ordering of things and their ordered thought. However, a more recent critical view of aesthetics extends this definition to include critique, resistance and a breaking with reality that encapsulates the creative process (Mersch 2015). Social media facilitates both these concepts of aesthetics, with almost
unbounded opportunities for the individual to obtain gratification by joining and following chosen groups and affords sites for their perceived aesthetically pleasing images and as easily, leaving unsatisfied groups. In terms of fashion shopping, aesthetically pleasing images are central to the consumption of fashion shows, looks and products (Skov et. al., 2009). While fashion brands create powerful identities to frame and control their image, individual sellers have absorbed their visual strategies in the process of reselling and purchasing goods. GenZ’s brand knowledge (Smith, 2019; Samala and Singh, 2019) and expertise in content curation, is evident in the sellers’ awareness of the need to show merchandise for sale “in the best way”, and to manipulate their settings for the right image.

The second most highly ranked affective gratification linked to images involved ‘stories in videos’. GenZ has a high level of visual sophistication due to their exposure to smartphones and the visual stimuli that extends from game playing to video watching (Smith, 2019). Stories unfold in different ways. The circulation of social media amplifies the spread of information - keeping-up-to -date - through the addition of personalised likes, comments and chat. These processes merge news with storytelling and the diversity of video stories creates a complex, interactive communications nexus that is central to GenZ’s social media usage. Further, this imagery combined with music, the drama of fashion shows and influencer endorsements make a significant contribution to the holistic experience of the fashion shopping journey. Some interview respondents also appeared to gain gratification from liking, collating and saving images of fashion items and accessories across platforms from Instagram to Pinterest which one respondent noted was an economic and sustainable way of ‘owning’ an item without having to buy it.

A third gratification identified by a smaller number of users in the survey and interviews was connectivity with ‘interesting people’, designers and brands. As with the importance of engagement with socially mediated stories, this definition crosses the boundaries of information and entertainment as it relates to the individual’s interests and their choice of people to look at or follow in terms of sources of influence. The gratification gained from accessing interesting people on social media platforms should be understood as a search for difference or distinctiveness to provide moments of diversion, ‘the equivalent of sharing a joke with a friend’, considered as a fun activity.

When addressing the uses of information and resulting knowledge-based gratifications, respondents described the gratification of staying up to date and acquiring new knowledge about fashions. A smaller number specifically referred to product reviews, in which authenticity if often uncertain and unverifiable: the currency of existing knowledge of lifestyle trends and obtaining new knowledge about them is a key component of the GenZ world. These consumers want to be part of lively online communities, including conversations with companies, and are accustomed to having instant access to information and feedback (Smith, 2019) that add value to their lives in terms of finding ‘must see’ events for example. They also want to be part of the creation and dissemination process of marketing content (Benoit et al., 2017) As ‘digital natives’ (Prentsky, 2009), GenZ have a real-time existence. A respondent explained that their motivation for social media use was partly social contact with friends
intended to maintain friendships, but also connecting with others enabling them to keep updated about the latest fashion and style trends or lifestyle and travel tips. The networked sociality of some sites are an attraction not only offering desired items but insider information as knowledge and social capital; as one respondent explained “…some resale sites such as US Poshmark have groups that you can join or you can like it or meet other people from different parts of the world and they have like brand ambassador programs.”

Being the first to know about the latest fashion trends, travel destinations or dietary news was also the most important social gratification for survey respondents (46%). As noted above, the term ‘news’ has become a relative term spanning factual, evidence-based information sources to fabrication and story-telling. It also relates to accessing the latest personal information about what friends and family are doing, and to information gathering about purchases. Latest news can refer to pre-purchasing, to purchases themselves where contacts post images of the purchasing process, for example, different looks or products and post-purchase comments and endorsements. The second ranked gratification was the ability to meet and see new people (32%). Making new friends and expanding networks are important gratifications sought from social media, particularly among children (Bossen and Kottasz, 2020). But the need for the latest news and to meet new people are also linked by the search for immediacy and novelty, which supports the previous findings about this generation needing to keep abreast of the latest developments in their areas of interest, as well as connecting with their social contacts synchronously. That the results for uses sought for information seeking and gratifications through social contacts are similar, demonstrate the holistic nature of socially mediated experiences in which social contacts embody ‘information’ effectively blurring the categories of uses and gratifications.

Turning to gratifications elicited from using social media for shopping, the most significant response (40%) was ‘to be inspired’. The search for inspiration appears to central to the circulation of messages on social media sites such as Instagram according to interview and survey respondents. The consumption of images provides a significant source of information and importantly, ideas for the construction of individual identities. Reading reviews about a product from other people (35%) and comparing products (22%) were also important knowledge sources for these consumers, constituting ‘go to’ touchpoints on their retail journey. Reviewing is both a passive and interactive activity that supports pre-purchase decisions based on information from different sources. This process also has a post-purchase function, where the purchaser posts reviews, exchanges comments and images and endorsements, such as likes and dislikes.

The interviews demonstrated the importance of the utilitarian gratification of finding low price items on online sale and resale platforms, which was supported by the survey findings. With fashion products the respondents discussed this in terms of finding a branded or designer bargain. There are several dimensions to price-point driven resale that distinguish it from e-commerce and socially mediated commercial activities; first that GenZ buyers know that products are generally not new, but are traded as previously owned, even if only marginally used, and that the price is set by the market rather than a brand’s price list. Second, products
sold in this way tend to be part of an individual’s curated collection and the quality of the
collection, the image of, and trust in, the seller contribute to the price that the product will
command. However, the interview findings demonstrated how difficult it was to sell, rather
than buy, on resale sites and that further know-how was required to make this a viable
proposition. Third, products can be hard to find elsewhere and have a unique or exclusive
element to them that adds value. This degree of exclusivity creates a further need to be informed
about preloved products. While physical stores selling vintage clothing have developed as a
retail sector, this product category is well suited to online selling and is supported by
recommendations from other shoppers on social media sites through the “heart” function.
Preloved is also recognised as a route to sustainable use of fashion resources and thereby can
gratify an individual’s need to contribute towards sustainability and action their concern for
the environment expressed through shopping habits.

During the shopping journey, social media platforms help consumers locate brand history and
activities associated with it. As respondent A explained, “knowledge of brands is important
for judging their quality, you know they are good quality so a second-hand purchase is likely
to be good”. Closely related to this, is the need to know about the product, its origins,
production processes, which satisfy a sustainability objective aligning with values about ethical
manufacturing and use of resources. By not buying new clothes the consumer is extending the
life of existing ones and satisfying their need to purchase new things but in a sustainable
manner. Product details also concern the authenticity of the product. In this visually mediated
world, where exclusivity of curated items is so important it is necessary to identify the ‘real’
thing from a copy, and the findings demonstrated that trusted opinions are valued; the quality
of this information helps overall decision-making by the consumer. As one respondent
observed, the motivation to buy through these platforms is almost entirely about price and
quality, so there is considerable gratification to be derived from finding items that are “really
cheap and sustainable” or a unique designer piece. There is an affective, but also a personal
integrative, value-driven element in seeking or finding bargains with the aim of creating a
capsule wardrobe, and specifically the ability to create an outfit that looks new and unique
from second-hand pieces. Although some interview respondents pointed out that sites selling
pre-loved fashion items such as The Luxury Closet stock more exclusive items than others such
as Vinted, and that there is more of an awareness of the value of designer items among
consumers so bargain designer items can be increasingly hard to find. Further, some interview
respondents explained that they would typically do research across the official brand sites and
various resell sites before buying or selling to pitch and validate the price and authenticity.

Discussion

The research supported findings into the uses and gratifications underlying consumer
behaviour and consumer interactions on social media. Time spent by consumers on the
different aspects of socialising, information gathering and entertainment helps to distinguish
their shopping journeys from the linear ‘stages’ of pre-purchasing, purchasing and post-
purchasing associated with an era of consumer behaviour founded on mass markets (Drewal
et. al, 2019) in brick-and-mortar contexts. The growth of services, in particular Product Service
Systems (PSS), has contributed to an extension of notions of post-purchase time. The consumption of experiences on the other hand, can lead to the compaction of time, as the purchase and post-purchase stages come closer together. The convenience and ubiquitous use of smart personal devices by consumers continues to re-define e-and social commerce which form part of many journeys, in which personalisation is subject to continual change by the use of personal data and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

However, the focus on GenZ consumers uncovered less well-known motivations about their consumption practices. There was an evident need to be engaged, to be in the moment by contrast to being passive and unoccupied. For a consumer not to be doing anything means they have little to post on a platform and with that lack of visibility they begin to disappear from their chosen friendship or other social groups. For socially engaged GenZ, invisibility strikes at the core of their online existence: new and interesting people, personal and commercial information, news and entertaining images have to be circulated. In relation to the uses and gratifications theory, the quantitative findings showed that ‘to be socially connected’ was more highly ranked that the other needs gratifications. It might be expected that isolation during the Covid-19 lockdowns would contribute to this need, but this relationship was not evident from the interviews. However, content gratification types indicated that information related content associated with obtaining current news scored higher than entertainment content and social content. This suggests that GenZ consumers position social media as the primary source of useful information, and in turn use the new knowledge as symbolic capital to connect with others in selling or buying items on resale sites.

The second question concerned the process of cognitive information seeking and fulfilling aesthetic and entertainment gratification forming part of the retail experience. The research showed the significance of affective gratification, entertainment, from aesthetically appealing images and the stories that unfold in Instagram videos, for example, as well as for value-added information gathering. Bossen and Kottasz (2020) found gratification of affect as the primary driver of adolescent behaviour on TikTok, in which their need for entertainment and fun are categorised as passive behaviours. However, this research showed that in a shopping journey, older GenZ consumers can quickly move from passivity to participation and contribution. Looking at fashion videos and images provides entertainment, but also information and inspiration to create personal looks or locate price points at which to sell items, which can gratify the need for status and credibility. For the seller the number of followers, likes and endorsements is critical to their future selling status, while the style hunter is seeking either a designer bargain or a unique find. In the shopping journey, positioning social media content as a source of inspiration before buying is evident. This is also manifested through the contributory, creative acts of curating a personal collection and creating a digital site for resale. Even if a GenZ consumer is only buying, the hunt for a cheap bargain and the creation of a personal collection of preloved, sustainable items requires a creative and productive capacity. Moreover, as the ‘looks’ can also be shared with friends and family, they have a participatory function as well. The research further demonstrated consumers’ interest in brands to support their own curating and trading activities; brand quality and authenticity contribute to a need to know a product’s value.
Theoretical implications

This research supports Grewal and Roggevein’s (2020) call to examine factors in the customer journey and the “looping aspects and jumps between different stages” (p.7) to reflect the non-linear process of the selling and shopping act. Previous research in social commerce research has demonstrated the role of social communities in pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase communications. Experience in the shopping journey is shown to be heightened by individual and social interaction, so that post-purchase reviews and images from one consumer can loop back into the pre-purchase, information gathering activities of other consumers. Importantly, the shopping behaviour of GenZ actions the concept of co-creation between consumers and brands, in which co-creative activities have moved further towards more consumer control over the shopping journey, contrasting with social commerce research which tends to have a business-led perspective.

Among GenZ, the use of selling platforms such as Depop provide an alternative commercial space to both demonstrate consumers’ personal curating interests, for example, their ability to curate their wardrobe, primarily as a buyer and create interesting personalised collections but also their commercial acumen in pricing, promoting and selling their merchandise, in some cases items that they had upcycled or repurposed. Storytelling and manipulating images to create an appropriate commercial effect, further contributes to the distancing of reality. It is important that the effect is recognised, liked and is communicable in the social media marketplace. GenZ consumers have to be particularly adept in interpreting images and text on the chosen site to work out how to maximise a sale or whether the product is what they want to buy. This creates a tension for consumers to navigate, between image, truth and authenticity, based on considerations of buyer beware.

The research addresses the conceptual development of UGT and the gratifications that motivate social media use. Drawing on Katz et al. (1973) these are generally tested in deductive research in cognitive, tension-release, affective, social integrative and personal integrative categories (Claffey and Brady, 2017; Rauschnabel, 2018). However, the gratification found from maintaining relationships and more implicitly from finding new people on social media, and seeking information have a considerable area of overlap among GenZ users. In responding to questions about information use participants demonstrate an interest in exchanging the latest news and viewing and commenting on interesting people, as information acquiring activities through their social contacts. In addition, they may also gather information about products in the same way, both through a social network as well as through formal reviews and branded sources. cognitive needs, for example information gathering, understanding, tension-release needs such as escapism or diversion. One limitation of the research is that as an exploratory project it did not seek to examine the relationship between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained. Previous research has shown that if gratifications obtained from use of a medium exceed those sought, it will lead to greater satisfaction and repeated use (Bae 2018). There was some evidence for users finding it too difficult to sell their items through resale
platforms and that the technical and operational problems of personal selling deserve further investigation.

Managerial implications

The research findings demonstrate how younger consumers in GenZ are using social media to create alternative shopping journeys. These consumers combine their experiences with those of their friendship and interest groups to collaborate in resale sites. Brand knowledge is important to them because branded products must project a clear identity to be curated and contribute to the owner’s collection. The marketers’ role is to take responsibility for brand guardianship to ensure the consistency of communications through multiple touchpoints and media and to create a user-friendly platform that enables buyers and sellers’ straightforward access (Park et al, 2017). A second role is to facilitate consumer use of platforms and websites, so that consumers can access the latest information, news and images about the product to incorporate into their commercial activities. A deliberately implemented customer experience could create a broader impactful engagement with the brand that may last longer in the consumers’ minds and therefore may lead brand attachment and brand loyalty (Jussila and Jalonen, 2017). In fashion marketing, omnichannel communications and distribution have become well established with many branded touchpoints provided by the brand or shared by the brand with the consumer. But the GenZ shopping journey stands outside conventional, linear journeys and managers need to respond to the constant flow of messages and images that relate to their brands but that are not within their control. As stories circulate through social media, the danger is that the brand owner’s core communications become distorted or lost.

Conclusion

The impact of Covid 19 during 2020 and 2021 was felt by all ages of the population and sectors of society. Lockdowns that prevented people from leaving their homes for more than very brief periods for essential activities, were commonly found in Europe and other parts of the world, from early 2020. They were repeated at various times and for different durations in the following months, and had a serious effect on consumption. Physical retailing and leisure sites were particularly badly affected, while e-commerce generally prospered.

However, GenZ’s use of social media provides insights into alternative shopping journeys. Where e-commerce has existed for several decades, social commerce is in an emergent phase and is defined by commercial activities and transactions on social media and networks (Esmaeili and Hashemi, 2019). As GenZ’s shopping journeys are conducted across social media and resale platforms, they inevitably share some of their characteristics with social commerce. However, there are distinctive points of difference. The most significant is the degree of control by the users and relative marginalisation of the brand and its commercial objectives. The second is the experiential nature of shopping that extends across use of visually appealing images, video and multiple and diverse social exchanges. As social commerce research recognises, online communities play a significant role in pre, purchase and post purchase activities. Nevertheless, in social commerce, producer-consumer interactivity is generally recognised to be in the hands of the businesses and research tends to focus on the
benefits to the business. By contrast GenZ seeks gratifications from social interactivity, information gathering from different sources including social interactions and entertainment. These experiential elements, sometimes separately but at other times intertwined enable consumers to realise their own ambitions and objectives. In the post-Covid world, where uncertainties remain about physical stores and e-commerce’s intrusion into personal privacy, GenZ’s shopping journeys have considerable appeal and assure a high level of agency for the consumer as collaborative producer.

References


