



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 in to 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 (Zomerdijs 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

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3 and contribute to heightened shopping experiences, hedonism and an expectation of hybrid
4 online and in-person offerings among users that are manifested in information sharing, social
5 interaction and real-time access to news and infotainment content (Zwanka and Buff, 2021).
6 Pantano and Gandini (2018) stated that the shopping experience of younger consumers has
7 shifted from a conventional store-based experience to a “networked experience” empowered
8 by social media and smartphone technologies. For businesses, social media sites have
9 facilitated e-commerce and more specifically created a context for social commerce, where
10 social and commercial activities are combined (Esmaeili and Hashemi, 2019). Consequently,
11 the digital environment has become integral to the functioning of everyday life (Dunas
12 and Vartanov, 2020), a process heightened by physical restrictions during Covid-19 lockdowns
13 (Statista, 2021), in which the interconnectivity of the digital ecosystem has taken on a more
14 significant role in the ways that consumers experience both selling and purchasing decisions
15 (Mintel, 2021).
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22 **GenZ**

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24 One important, yet under-researched group of ‘tech-native’ consumers, are Generation Z
25 (GenZ) who were born between 1995-2005 (Dimock 2019; Fry and Parker 2018; Priporas *et*
26 *al.* 2017). Their consumption characteristics are fundamentally defined by the presence of
27 digital technology, including smartphones, wifi and computer games. throughout their lives
28 (Smith 2019). Gen Z spend more time online than any other demographic sector and actively
29 contribute to consumption conversations, notably via mobile communication devices, for a
30 range of functional purposes and social gratifications including shopping (Priporas *et al.* 2017;
31 Howe and Strauss, 2009). Their presence is increasingly evident in emerging forms of
32 exchange and consumption, specifically in the peer to peer (P2P), collaborative, sharing
33 economy (Patel 2017; Kim 2019; Choi and He 2019) and in how they value non-ownership
34 and possession of previously used objects (Hamari *et al.* 2016). These characteristics contribute
35 to consumption experiences in which social media usage occupies a central role whereby
36 shopping journeys are more complex, non-linear and less well defined.
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43 These consumers have had a high level of autonomy from a young age and their access to
44 online information makes them knowledgeable about brands (Bassiouni and Hackley, 2014).
45 By contrast with earlier generations, GenZ are typified by their artisanal activities, use of local-
46 origin stories and curatorial ability with their possessions which supports their identity as
47 seekers-out of unique products and services (Goldring and Azab, 2021). As consumers in a
48 digital world, GenZ are particularly concerned with ‘influence’ to support and guide them,
49 from trusted peers and friends but also online influencers: influence in this context merges
50 functional, cognitive and affective behaviours (Childers *et al.*, 2001).
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55 However, there is relatively little academic research that specifically on GenZ’s use of digital
56 skills and brand knowledge for consumption practices, although industry reports provide
57 insights into their importance for retail processes (Patel 2017; Fromm 2018, McKinsey, 2020).
58 Further, the research focus has tended to centre on consumers not sellers, so sometimes in this
59 social context, sellers are also users. One way Gen Z consumers demonstrate their autonomy,
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3 is through their propensity to buy, sell and re-sell at will and largely on their own terms through
4 online exchange sites, including *Depop*, *Poshmark* and *Vinted* (Hoffower, 2021). These
5 networked sites provide agency, empowerment and lucrative, assured income for their resell
6 hustle. In this sense they are both consumers and ‘prosumers’ (Kotler, 1986) or digital
7 prosumers (Ritzer et al., 2010) operating in and driving collaborative consumption
8 communities. Representing a global challenge to traditional business models and associated
9 market regulatory structures, collaborative consumption markets they are “scalable, non
10 geographically bound, and enduring platforms that operate synergistically with traditional
11 marketplaces” (Chalmers et al., 2013). They are also more dynamic and fluid than the
12 established buyer-seller dyad and operate in a triadic format (Benoit et al. 2017), comprising
13 the interdependent actors of buyers and sellers and the digital platform provider all involved in
14 the co-production of the consumption experience.
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21 First, these mediated sites enable consumers to create and curate their own “divided wardrobe”
22 comprising a mix of items sourced from resale or rented vendors. Secondly, they make a
23 significant potential contribution to the circular fashion economy (Markova *et al.* 2017)
24 through purchasing pre-owned items and reselling past purchases (Laitala, 2014). Heightened
25 social media consumption forms a living environment for Gen Z, possessing the qualities and
26 characteristics, not merely of the mediated channel itself, but also of the social space, denoting
27 different types of interactions with different platforms (Dunas and Vartanov, 2020). This retail
28 community seeks pleasure from sourcing a style or look, for example, original 1970s or 1980s
29 clothing and accessories, beyond a specific brand that is unique and individual, which is
30 intrinsic to the value of the sartorial ‘find’ in a given transaction.
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35 The combination of information gathering, social connection, pleasure seeking and commercial
36 activity on social media and online exchange sites highlights the importance of experiences for
37 the GenZ consumer. Experience is conceptualized as consumption generating hedonic and
38 utilitarian value that exists as a multidimensional construct in a commercial context involving
39 the customer’s cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical responses to a retailer
40 (Verhoef *et al.*, 2016). It involves a combination of products, environment and activities and
41 also communication and distribution channels to bring about the experience. Consumer
42 immersion in an experience takes place when this context is enclosed, secure, and thematized
43 (Carù and Cova, 2006; Bèzes, 2019). Moreover, an experience is not dependent on brand
44 perception, because the experience does not have to be part of a motivational state (Morrison
45 and Crane 2017). Therefore, even if consumers are not familiar with a brand or if the item is
46 unbranded, unlabelled or vintage, it is still possible to have a distinctive experience as a
47 customer, because the essence or aesthetic form determines how the brand-related stimuli is
48 transmitted (Morrison and Crane, 2017) and decoded. The power of these stimuli varies, as
49 some brands can convey a more dynamic experience while others create a more sophisticated
50 experience (Brun *et al.*, 2017). The accessibility of fashion brands and items has come to play
51 a significant role in GenZ’s lives as individual and collective identity markers (Samala and
52 Singh, 2019). While GenZ consumers identify with identifiable brands Nike or Converse and
53 are brand loyal, the brand can also be supplementary to the product itself: its specific look or
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3 name and could be immaterial when making an unbranded or vintage purchase of an unfamiliar
4 brand.
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7 In the context of consumer purchase experiences, feelings and emotions play a critical role in
8 predisposing consumers to purchase goods (Aydinli *et al.*, 2017). Researchers have discovered
9 tpsychological impacts on the consumer journey and social experiences through cognitive,
10 emotional, behavioural, sensorial and cultural encounters (Shavitt and Barnes, 2020; Lemon
11 and Peter, 2016). However, affective aspects are found infused throughout a shopping
12 experience (Iglesias *et al.*, 2011; Brun *et al.*, 2017) in three salient aspects: product search and
13 identification; engagement and/or purchase; and consumption (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Hoyer *et*
14 *al.*, 2020). The prosumer experiences from these stages can be interlinked, so that past
15 experiences impact current and future experiences, whereby the experiences of today become
16 the past experiences for tomorrow (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020), a process where consumers
17 may seemingly jump from the pre- purchase to post-purchase stage. , Yet, this shopping
18 process is less well understood in the context of younger consumers and their social media
19 motivations and usages in the shopping journey.
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25 **Theoretical framework**

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28 Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) originated in studies of mass media behaviour, intent
29 on understanding consumer motivations and the related gratifications they achieved from mass
30 mediated consumption processes (Katz and Gurevitch 1973; Katz *et. al.*, 1974). Use of media
31 is selective and motivated by an awareness of personal and functional needs that are a
32 combination of psychological, sociological and environmental conditions (Bae, 2018) such as
33 personal identity or escapism, while gratifications refer to expectations about the content
34 formed in advance of using the medium such as the affordances of socialisation or the benefits
35 gained from information-seeking. Katz (1973) categorises needs in five groupings, cognitive,
36 affective, personal integrative, social integrative and escape. According to UGT, people tend
37 to be motivated to use any mass medium by how much they rely on it (Galloway and Meek,
38 1981), and how well it satisfies their needs (Boudkouss and Djelassi, 2020; Lichtenstein and
39 Rosenfeld, 1983), or fulfils unsatisfied needs by using particular media (Raschnaubel, 2018).
40 Gratifications obtained refer to the satisfaction obtained from using something (Palmgreen *et*
41 *al.*, 1980), and the difference between gratifications sought and those obtained can demonstrate
42 the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction experienced by individual users (Palmgreen and
43 Rayburn, 1979; Palmgreen *et al.*, 1980; Quan-Haase and Young, 2010).
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51 Online connectivity has created new forms of media and the use of personal devices has been
52 linked to individuals' motivations to use the Internet and particular types of mediated
53 communication for communication and interactive purposes that relate to the fulfillment of
54 gratifications such as social identity, interpersonal communication, parasocial interaction,
55 companionship, escape, entertainment, and surveillance (Ruggiero, 2009). Preference patterns
56 by people regarding new media technology, including social media, have been acknowledged
57 as part of media effects research that is linked to UGT (Holwey, 2019; Ruggiero, 2009). For
58 this reason, UGT has been employed in many digital media and communication technology
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3 studies (Hui-Yi and Ling-Yin, 2018; Whiting and Williams, 2013), including mobile device
4 adoption (Joo and Sang, 2013), social media usage and social commerce. Different types of
5 SM demonstrate distinctive user gratification needs and new gratifications to explain, in part
6 how individuals use different types of social media (Ruggiero, 2002; Sheldon and Bryant,
7 2016). Previous studies using UGT have posited that frequent users of Facebook, Twitter,
8 Instagram, and Snapchat derive different gratifications from their use, which are passing time,
9 showing affection, following fashion, sharing problems, demonstrating sociability and
10 improving social knowledge (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), and also have different impacts on
11 brand community related outcomes: identification, engagement, commitment, and membership
12 intention (Phua *et al.*, 2017).
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18 Shopping motivations are primarily utilitarian, relating to price and function and hedonic,
19 which includes adventure, gratification, role, value, social, and idea shopping motivations
20 (Childers *et al.*, 2001; Kim, 2006; Babin *et al.*, 1994; Arnold and Reynolds 2003). Cai and
21 Wohn (2019) found gratifications from online shopping domains with dimensions related to
22 social media and social live streaming services. Research on live streaming commerce
23 identified the factors of consumer motivations through UGT and found that the gratifications
24 of social presence and enjoyment are associated with the symbolic value and hedonic value of
25 consumers' social shopping experiences (Athwal *et al.*, 2019; Cai and Wohn, 2019; Joines *et*
26 *al.*, 2003; Wongkitrungrueng *et al.* 2020a;). Intention to engage in social commerce is positively
27 influenced by accessing information quality, cool new trends, and perceived enjoyment
28 (Sharma and Crossler, 2014). However, combining Gen Z consumer behaviour and related
29 gratifications have not been examined in existing social media and social commerce research.
30 This study adopted UGT and consumer experience approaches to understand GenZ consumers'
31 motivations and intentions in social commerce. The central proposition of positioning people
32 to be more in control of the medium they are using helps explain how individual consumers
33 anticipate what social media can deliver to gratify their needs (Hui-Yi and Ling-Yin, 2015;
34 Langlotz *et al.*, 2014; Raacke and Raacke, 2008; Ruggiero, 2000) and how that might shape
35 the consumer journey.
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43 Studies have shown that a holistic experience is expected by the customer regardless of how
44 and where it is accessed in the customer journey (Colombi *et al.*, 2018; Foroudi *et al.*, 2018;
45 Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Prentice *et al.*, 2019). In addition, the sense of immersion in an
46 experience is contextualized by the distance of the consumer from a combination of products,
47 environment, and activities (Bèzes, 2019; Carù and Cova, 2006). Social commerce, through
48 video-sharing and livestreaming social networking sites (SNS) could enhance retail experience
49 by fulfilling the gratification needs of Gen Z consumers during periods of physical retail
50 inaccessibility. In particular, the shoppable livestream experiences offered by SNS, especially
51 through TikTok, are attractive to GenZ consumers as they feature product information,
52 communication quality, enjoyment and social presence (Wongkitrungrueng and Assarut,
53 2020). The experience is connected to their ability to co-create a product, for example, on
54 *Depop's* site, there is a section encouraging sellers to engage contribute to 'being the brand'.
55 In this way, users are looking at the brands and popular sellers at the same time, with the
56 potential to become a branded prosumer in their own right. Co-engagement experience can
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3 connect with and be analysed by applying UGT, but there is little in previous research about
4 the gratification of needs for co-creation and co-engagement in online retail settings.
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7 Two research questions arise from this review of the literature. First, how do socially evolving
8 social media (SM) behaviours among GenZ on resale fashion sites contribute to a different
9 retail structure and consumer interaction, recognising the saliency of influence, collaboration
10 and ownership from a consumer/prosumer perspective? Secondly, what motivating uses
11 (cognitive information seeking and purchasing) and gratifications (emotive, aesthetic, social
12 and entertaining) are embedded in GenZ's collaborative selling and consumption or
13 prosumption experiences?
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17 **Methodology**

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20 The research was undertaken as an exploratory project using a mixed methods approach. The
21 choice of an exploratory design is explained by the relative lack of earlier research in the field
22 of GenZ consumption, but it also responded to the need to develop new knowledge about
23 emerging generational shopping journeys. An initial, qualitative pilot study, aimed to achieve
24 a deeper understanding of consumer feelings and perceptions about respondents' needs from
25 social media online shopping journeys (Hammersley, 2011). At this stage, in-depth interviews
26 were undertaken to scope the problem using twenty-three unstructured questions derived from
27 consumer behavioural literature (Creswell, 2001). The first group of questions used a UGT
28 framework to explore respondents' motivations when employing social media for social use,
29 for example connecting with friends, for information seeking and entertainment. A second
30 group of questions elicited responses about the respondent's content curation, connection with
31 brands and personal commercial activity on social media. Due to Covid-19 restrictions the
32 number of participants was limited and six students were selected from an online convenience
33 sample and interviewed online, for around 45 minutes. The qualitative content was coded and
34 analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in three main themes of social media usage motivation,
35 keeping in contact "being up to date" and a nexus of information-entertainment.
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43 The second stage of the data collection was undertaken using an agile survey to develop
44 constructs in the use and gratification of social media combined with experiences of social
45 media in the shopping journey. The online survey used a questionnaire with items derived
46 from previous research (Katz and Gurevitch, 1973; Quan-Haase and Young, 2010) which
47 combined UGT with Whiting and Williams's (2013) experiential value of social media applied
48 to digital consumption and insights from the first stage interviews. The questionnaire was
49 designed with seven categories of gratifications: social interaction; information seeking; to
50 pass time; entertainment; relaxation; communicatory utility; and convenience utility (Whiting
51 and Whiting, 2013). In each category, items were framed around the consumption practices
52 and gratifications expected from shopping with social media, addressing social media usage,
53 needs gratifications, resale market platform, and social media and shopping journey. The
54 question types used were multiple choice and used a 5 point Likert scale, with a total of
55 twenty- seven questions. The questionnaire was constructed in googleforms and distributed
56 via online platforms including email and social media. Responses were received from 102
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3 postgraduate level students of whom, 60% of respondents were female, 30% male with the
4 remaining percentage unrecorded. The analysis, in alignment with a mixed research methods
5 approach, was undertaken using univariate statistics to summarise the findings.
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8 **Findings**

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11 The research confirmed that mobile phones are the most popular device used to access social
12 media sites, by 93% of respondents, followed by laptops and tablets. The low usage of tablets
13 may reflect their size and capability, as they fall between the portability of mobile phones and
14 the large screen accessibility of laptops. For a shopping journey, social media is considered to
15 be a key part of the interview and survey respondents' everyday lives. Instagram is the most
16 used platform (99%), followed by Facebook (33%) and YouTube (32%). However, these
17 platforms can serve different functions and the motivations to use them and gratifications
18 arising from them varies by platform. Interview respondents were able to differentiate their
19 preferences for different social media usage and the ability to use sites for a combination of
20 purposes. While Instagram was the most popular platform for information gathering, all have
21 multiple uses that often combine information seeking, chat and entertainment. This diversity
22 contributed to the emergence of a temporal theme, evident in a need for immediate
23 gratification, as one respondent explained: "YouTube and TikTok are there to 'keep me busy'"
24 and to stop the timelessness of boredom setting in. Immediacy was an appealing feature of
25 Snapchat while Twitter was criticised for "mindless scrolling" and the Depop resale site could
26 be overwhelmingly time-consuming to navigate. But temporality was also evident in the users'
27 changing perceptions over time of different media and their usefulness. Facebook was used
28 for keeping in touch with family, posting events and was seen to be more popular with 'older
29 people' as it lacked the immediacy of engagement and multimodal aspects of still and moving
30 images, unlike Instagram or Tik Tok, the more preferred social media platforms.
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34 The survey findings show that the most important uses and gratifications exhibited by GenZ
35 consumers in using social media sites could be categorised into three themes, social
36 connectivity (4.3), entertainment (4.17) and knowledge acquisition (3.77). These were
37 supported by the interview findings where respondents sought gratification from social and
38 pleasure-seeking alongside useful information seeking, through social media engagement. In
39 considering how affective gratifications are sought from social media content, text has long
40 been replaced by still and moving image as the prevalent form of multi-modal communication.
41 The findings showed that still image is the most used, (4.17), followed by moving image (4.09)
42 and text (3.38). The highest affective gratification sought from the use of such images reported
43 by both survey and interview respondents was the ability to access and post aesthetically
44 pleasing, and in some cases inspiring pictures that could be used to access new, upcoming or
45 sustainable designers or an individual's own fashion and accessory collection or styled "look"
46 Aesthetics, in the classical tradition, is founded on the viewer's seeing and gaining of insights
47 from an object or a source and the correspondence between the ordering of things and their
48 ordered thought. However, a more recent critical view of aesthetics extends this definition to
49 include critique, resistance and a breaking with reality that encapsulates the creative process
50 (Mersch 2015). Social media facilitates both these concepts of aesthetics, with almost
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3 unbounded opportunities for the individual to obtain gratification by joining and following
4 chosen groups and affords sites for their perceived aesthetically pleasing images and as easily,
5 leaving unsatisfied groups. In terms of fashion shopping, aesthetically pleasing images are
6 central to the consumption of fashion shows, looks and products (Skov et. al., 2009). While
7 fashion brands create powerful identities to frame and control their image, individual sellers
8 have absorbed their visual strategies in the process of reselling and purchasing goods. GenZ's
9 brand knowledge (Smith, 2019; Samala and Singh, 2019) and expertise in content curation, is
10 evident in the sellers' awareness of the need to show merchandise for sale "in the best way",
11 and to manipulate their settings for the right image.
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16 The second most highly ranked affective gratification linked to images involved 'stories in
17 videos'. GenZ has a high level of visual sophistication due to their exposure to smartphones
18 and the visual stimuli that extends from game playing to video watching (Smith, 2019). Stories
19 unfold in different ways. The circulation of social media amplifies the spread of information -
20 keeping-up-to -date - through the addition of personalised likes, comments and chat. These
21 processes merge news with storytelling and the diversity of video stories creates a complex,
22 interactive communications nexus that is central to GenZ's social media usage. Further, this
23 imagery combined with music, the drama of fashion shows and influencer endorsements make
24 a significant contribution to the holistic experience of the fashion shopping journey. Some
25 interview respondents also appeared to gain gratification from liking, collating and saving
26 images of fashion items and accessories across platforms from Instagram to Pinterest which
27 one respondent noted was an economic and sustainable way of 'owning' an item without
28 having to buy it.
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34 A third gratification identified by a smaller number of users in the survey and interviews was
35 connectivity with 'interesting people', designers and brands. As with the importance of
36 engagement with socially mediated stories, this definition crosses the boundaries of
37 information and entertainment as it relates to the individual's interests and their choice of
38 people to look at or follow in terms of sources of influence. The gratification gained from
39 accessing interesting people on social media platforms should be understood as a search for
40 difference or distinctiveness to provide moments of diversion, 'the equivalent of sharing a joke
41 with a friend', considered as a fun activity.
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47 When addressing the uses of information and resulting knowledge-based gratifications,
48 respondents described the gratification of staying up to date and acquiring new knowledge
49 about fashions. A smaller number specifically referred to product reviews, in which
50 authenticity is often uncertain and unverifiable: the currency of existing knowledge of lifestyle
51 trends and obtaining new knowledge about them is a key component of the GenZ world. These
52 consumers want to be part of lively online communities, including conversations with
53 companies, and are accustomed to having instant access to information and feedback (Smith,
54 2019) that add value to their lives in terms of finding 'must see' events for example. They also
55 want to be part of the creation and dissemination process of marketing content (Benoit et al.,
56 2017) As 'digital natives' (Prentsky, 2009), GenZ have a real-time existence. A respondent
57 explained that their motivation for social media use was partly social contact with friends
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3 intended to maintain friendships, but also connecting with others enabling them to keep
4 updated about the latest fashion and style trends or lifestyle and travel tips. The networked
5 sociality of some sites are an attraction not only offering desired items but insider information
6 as knowledge and social capital; as one respondent explained "...some resale sites such as US
7 Poshmark have groups that you can join or you can like it or meet other people from different
8 parts of the world and they have like brand ambassador programs."
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12 Being the first to know about the latest fashion trends, travel destinations or dietary news was
13 also the most important social gratification for survey respondents (46%). As noted above, the
14 term 'news' has become a relative term spanning factual, evidence-based information sources
15 to fabrication and story-telling. It also relates to accessing the latest personal information about
16 what friends and family are doing, and to information gathering about purchases. Latest news
17 can refer to pre-purchasing, to purchases themselves where contacts post images of the
18 purchasing process, for example, different looks or products and post-purchase comments and
19 endorsements. The second ranked gratification was the ability to meet and see new people
20 (32%). Making new friends and expanding networks are important gratifications sought from
21 social media, particularly among children (Bossen and Kottasz, 2020). But the need for the
22 latest news and to meet new people are also linked by the search for immediacy and novelty,
23 which supports the previous findings about this generation needing to keep abreast of the latest
24 developments in their areas of interest, as well as connecting with their social contacts
25 synchronously. That the results for uses sought for information seeking and gratifications
26 through social contacts are similar, demonstrate the holistic nature of socially mediated
27 experiences in which social contacts embody 'information' effectively blurring the categories
28 of uses and gratifications.
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36 Turning to gratifications elicited from using social media for shopping, the most significant
37 response (40%) was 'to be inspired'. The search for inspiration appears to central to the
38 circulation of messages on social media sites such as Instagram according to interview and
39 survey respondents. The consumption of images provides a significant source of information
40 and importantly, ideas for the construction of individual identities. Reading reviews about a
41 product from other people (35%) and comparing products (22%) were also important
42 knowledge sources for these consumers, constituting 'go to' touchpoints on their retail journey.
43 Reviewing is both a passive and interactive activity that supports pre-purchase decisions based
44 on information from different sources. This process also has a post-purchase function, where
45 the purchaser posts reviews, exchanges comments and images and endorsements, such as likes
46 and dislikes
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51 The interviews demonstrated the importance of the utilitarian gratification of finding low price
52 items on online sale and resale platforms, which was supported by the survey findings. With
53 fashion products the respondents discussed this in terms of finding a branded or designer
54 bargain. There are several dimensions to price-point driven resale that distinguish it from e-
55 commerce and socially mediated commercial activities; first that GenZ buyers know that
56 products are generally not new, but are traded as previously owned, even if only marginally
57 used, and that the price is set by the market rather than a brand's price list. Second, products
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3 sold in this way tend to be part of an individual's curated collection and the quality of the
4 collection, the image of, and trust in, the seller contribute to the price that the product will
5 command. However, the interview findings demonstrated how difficult it was to sell, rather
6 than buy, on resale sites and that further know-how was required to make this a viable
7 proposition. Third, products can be hard to find elsewhere and have a unique or exclusive
8 element to them that adds value. This degree of exclusivity creates a further need to be informed
9 about preloved products. While physical stores selling vintage clothing have developed as a
10 retail sector, this product category is well suited to online selling and is supported by
11 recommendations from other shoppers on social media sites through the 'heart' function.
12 Preloved is also recognised as a route to sustainable use of fashion resources and thereby can
13 gratify an individual's need to contribute towards sustainability and action their concern for
14 the environment expressed through shopping habits.

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

50 Discussion

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52 The research supported findings into the uses and gratifications underlying consumer
53 behaviour and consumer interactions on social media. Time spent by consumers on the
54 different aspects of socialising, information gathering and entertainment helps to distinguish
55 their shopping journeys from the linear 'stages' of pre-purchasing, purchasing and post-
56 purchasing associated with an era of consumer behaviour founded on mass markets (Drewal
57 et. al, 2019) in brick-and-mortar contexts. The growth of services, in particular Product Service
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3 Systems (PSS), has contributed to an extension of notions of post-purchase time. The
4 consumption of experiences on the other hand, can lead to the compaction of time, as the
5 purchase and post-purchase stages come closer together. The convenience and ubiquitous use
6 of smart personal devices by consumers continues to re-define e-and social commerce which
7 form part of many journeys, in which personalisation is subject to continual change by the use
8 of personal data and Artificial Intelligence (AI).
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12 However, the focus on GenZ consumers uncovered less well-known motivations about their
13 consumption practices. There was an evident need to be engaged, to be in the moment by
14 contrast to being passive and unoccupied. For a consumer not to be doing anything means they
15 have little to post on a platform and with that lack of visibility they begin to disappear from
16 their chosen friendship or other social groups. For socially engaged GenZ, invisibility strikes
17 at the core of their online existence: new and interesting people, personal and commercial
18 information, news and entertaining images have to be circulated. In relation to the uses and
19 gratifications theory, the quantitative findings showed that 'to be socially connected' was more
20 highly ranked than the other needs gratifications. It might be expected that isolation during the
21 Covid-19 lockdowns would contribute to this need, but this relationship was not evident from
22 the interviews. However, content gratification types indicated that information related content
23 associated with obtaining current news scored higher than entertainment content and social
24 content. This suggests that GenZ consumers position social media as the primary source of
25 useful information, and in turn use the new knowledge as symbolic capital to connect with
26 others in selling or buying items on resale sites.
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34 The second question concerned the process of cognitive information seeking and fulfilling
35 aesthetic and entertainment gratification forming part of the retail experience. The research
36 showed the significance of affective gratification, entertainment, from aesthetically appealing
37 images and the stories that unfold in Instagram videos, for example, as well as for value-added
38 information gathering. Bossen and Kottasz (2020) found gratification of affect as the primary
39 driver of adolescent behaviour on TikTok, in which their need for entertainment and fun are
40 categorised as passive behaviours. However, this research showed that in a shopping journey,
41 older GenZ consumers can quickly move from passivity to participation and contribution.
42 Looking at fashion videos and images provides entertainment, but also information and
43 inspiration to create personal looks or locate price points at which to sell items, which can
44 gratify the need for status and credibility. For the seller the number of followers, likes and
45 endorsements is critical to their future selling status, while the style hunter is seeking either a
46 designer bargain or a unique find. In the shopping journey, positioning social media content as
47 a source of inspiration before buying is evident. This is also manifested through the
48 contributory, creative acts of curating a personal collection and creating a digital site for re-
49 sale. Even if a GenZ consumer is only buying, the hunt for a cheap bargain and the creation of
50 a personal collection of preloved, sustainable items requires a creative and productive capacity.
51 Moreover, as the 'looks' can also be shared with friends and family, they have a participatory
52 function as well. The research further demonstrated consumers' interest in brands to support
53 their own curating and trading activities; brand quality and authenticity contribute to a need to
54 know a product's value.
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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 (Esmaili 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.

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