

## Online fashion shopping paradox

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# **Online Fashion Shopping Paradox: The Role of Customer Reviews and Facebook Marketing**

## **Abstract**

The paper aims to investigate the relevance of social media marketing, particularly customer reviews and Facebook pages in online fashion shopping. This qualitative study adopts Personal Construct Theory and employs the repertory grid to investigate the question: 'how do online fashion shoppers construct the relevance of social media marketing activities in their online shopping experience? Analysis of 25 repertory grid interviews reveal insights that challenge current understanding of the role and relevance of customer reviews and Facebook pages in online fashion shopping. The research contributes novel insights into the rising desire of individuality and the increasing lack of sociality on social media.

**Keywords:** Customer reviews, Fashion, Social Media, Facebook, Online retailing, Repertory grid, online fashion shopping

## 1. Introduction

Social media marketing<sup>1</sup> has become the buzz of the marketing world, attracting ever-increasing attention and booming interest from brands and businesses both large and small. Social media websites now receive the highest web traffic worldwide (Alexa, 2018) and one third of online time is spent on social media (GlobalWebIndex, 2018). There are 2.13 billion monthly active Facebook users (Facebook, 2018a), along with 60 million active business pages (Facebook, 2018b). It is safe to say that social media has gone ‘viral’.

More than 2.5 million businesses pay to use Facebook advertising, and 75% of brands pay to promote posts (Smith, 2016). However, a lack of purpose remains apparent in a number of business cases and across industries. For instance, the myopic focus on likes and follows rather than engagement has been a mistake for which many businesses are still paying the price (Walters, 2016). All facilitated by Facebook infrastructure of the so-called ‘Like Economy’ in which certain behaviors are encouraged, metrified and multiplied beyond their value (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013).

It is a matter for concern, since the increasing popularity of social media has resulted in a rushed reaction from many businesses that hoped to jump on the bandwagon called social media marketing. Particularly, the risk of over generalization of social media functions and relevance across industries is rising. The varying role of social media across industries and product categories is not accounted for, and a one size fits all approach seems apparent in current research and practices.

Scholars have attempted to critically evaluate the importance of social media and its employment in a business context, for instance, Quesenberry (2016) suggests that social

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<sup>1</sup> Social media and social networking sites are often used interchangeably in the existing literature. In this paper, the term social networking sites is reserved for a specific type of social media where users create profiles and use these to connect with others (e.g. Facebook) (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Other social media types include blogs, vlogs, microblogging and any user-created content, including customer reviews.

media marketing is too important to be left to the marketing department solely, thus arguing that it requires a holistic business involvement.

Another key dimension to social media marketing is the radical shift in communication and how consumers produce, share and gather information online (Pitt *et al.*, 2002; Yeh and Choi, 2011). Social media has become a space for individual expression, a tool for easier searching and better choices, and a marketing intelligence source to anticipating users' preferences and behavior (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). Particularly, in terms of online shopping, consumers rely on social media as a source of information which could come from strangers and anonymous users (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; Schindler and Bickart, 2005; Sen and Lerman, 2007). This product/service-related information are shared on social media in the form of reviews. It is estimated that 78% of Internet users in the UK report reading product/service reviews online before buying a new technology product (Intel, 2016), and more than two thirds of consumers report that they trust online reviews (Nielsen, 2015). In addition, consumers also easily and critically share independent reviews of products and services alike.

However, despite this research insights into customer reviews and Facebook likes, it remains unclear whether their role is relevant in industry specific context. For instance, customer reviews seem to be of great significance for technology products (Intel, 2016), generalizing this to clothing and fashion is problematic. Indeed, it remains unclear how consumers, in the fashion industry, construct their experience of such social media related exposure and interactions.

Accordingly, this research critically investigates the role of social media marketing in an industry-specific context. Focusing on Personal Construct Theory (PCT) (Kelly, 1955), the perceived relevance and effectiveness of customer reviews and Facebook related marketing activities within the fashion industry are investigated as constructed by the consumers and

using their own words. Our main aim is to answer the question: “Based on Personal Construct Theory, how do online fashion shoppers construct the relevance of social media marketing activities in their online shopping experience?” Indeed, this question would then open a window of opportunity to, first, contribute to the theoretical understanding of consumer perception and online shopping experience in the social media environment by using the foundations of personal construct theory to uncover such constructs. Second, it would result in insightful implications to the field of fashion marketing, explaining whether social media marketing activities in the fashion industry such as customer reviews and Facebook marketing are as influential as they appear to be in other industries.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Online Customer Reviews**

Online customer reviews have become an essential tool on most retailers’ and service providers’ websites. Existing research investigating customer reviews of products and services focuses on three key areas of enquiry: (1) reasons for writing reviews (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2011; Moe and Trusov, 2011; Schlosser, 2005), (2) reasons for reading reviews (e.g. Burton and Khammash, 2010), and (3) the effectiveness and influence of customer reviews (e.g. Chakraborty and Bhat 2018; Dellarocas, Zhang and Awad, 2007; Frick and Kaimann 2017; Folse *et al.*, 2016; Sen and Lerman, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2005). Within the scope of this paper, the literature that is most relevant is the latter two: examining the reasons for reading reviews and their effectiveness and influence on the customer.

Reasons for reading reviews include factors relevant to purchase decision involvement (e.g. risk reduction) and product involvement (e.g. to learn about new products) (Burton and Khammash, 2010). In addition, personal reasons include self-involvement for instance to expand one’s general knowledge or to satisfy curiosity and social involvement (e.g.

belonging to an online community) (*ibid*). Whether reviews are read for personal or purchase-related reasons greatly influences how such reviews then impact on the customers.

In addition to exploring the motivations for reading customer reviews, a growing body of literature discusses the influence of these reviews and their effectiveness for business and consumers. Factors that contribute to the effectiveness of online customer reviews include (1) providing fast, easy and almost instantaneous communication which is accessible by the public and (2) easy identification of content with the help of search engines (Hong and Lee, 2005; Sparks and Browning, 2010). As reviews are made in the public domain, this may become a major concern for managers in the case of negative reviews and an important opportunity in the case of positive ones (e.g. Purnawirawan *et al.*, 2015).

Research shows that customer reviews influence product sales in certain industries such as books, restaurants and technology products (e.g. Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Frick and Kaimann, 2017; Moe and Trusov, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, reviews also influence customers' willingness to pay in varying degrees (Wu and Wu, 2016) and also positively influence their offline purchase intentions (Flavián *et al.*, 2016) and online purchases such as software downloads (Frick and Kaimann, 2017). Consumer reviews also known to influence formation of consumers' trust, particularly competence dimension of trust judgements (Stouthuysen *et al.*, 2018). In spite of the important role of customer reviews as highlighted in the aforementioned literature, it is worth noting that the impact of reviews varies depending on the nature and effectiveness of the review (Chakraborty and Bhat, 2018; Cao *et al.*, 2011; Kim and Gupta, 2012), and arguably the role of reviews may vary across industries and product categories. These two issues are vital in critically understanding the impact of customer reviews, and as such they are discussed in detail below.

The first issue to explore is the nature of the review and what makes a review effective. Quality of the review is one of the most important factors that influence credibility of the

review and ultimately consumers' future behaviors (Chakraborty and Bhat, 2018). Cao *et al.* (2011) assert that the unstructured nature of online reviews can create challenges for consumers in terms of how to interpret them, thus arguing that effective reviews must have a structure that allows ease of access and interpretation. For example, long and narrative reviews are not perceived as helpful, but overall ranking scores are (Filieri *et al.*, 2018). In addition, research suggests that emotional expressions in reviews also influence their impact (Felbermayr and Nanopoulos, 2016). For instance, Kim and Gupta (2012) suggest that a negative review consisting of negative emotional expressions is perceived as less valuable and less influential because of the association of the negative review with the negative state of the reviewer instead of the product or service being reviewed.

Furthermore, contextual information and reviewer details have an effect on the impact of reviews (Hu *et al.*, 2008; Chakraborty and Bhat, 2018). For example, Cheng and Ho (2015) reveal that when reviewers have a large number of followers and a higher level of expertise, their reviews are perceived as being more practical and useful. Similarly, both the average score and word count of a review are found to influence sales of products (Cheng and Ho, 2015; Zhang *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, review effectiveness is linked to a number of issues that relate to the nature of the review and its content and context, in addition to the influence of the reviewer's status and the dynamics of the platform.

The second issue relates to reviews across industries and product categories (see Table 1 for the list of selected papers across industries). The role of reviews has been investigated in a number of industries, showing how certain consumption practices are affected. For instance, reviews seem to have an influential role in the entertainment and media industry (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004), movies (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2015), online book sales (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), bath, fragrance and beauty products (Moe and Trusov, 2011), video gaming

(Frick and Kaimann, 2017; Zhu and Zhang, 2010) and in the hospitality industry (e.g. Tripadvisor) (Bigné *et al.*, 2016; Fong et al., 2017; Tan et al., 2018)

**<Place Table 1 about here>**

As existing literature focused on reviews within several industries such as the media and entertainment industry (e.g. TV shows and movies), the hospitality industry (e.g. restaurants and hotels), as well as video games, books, bath, fragrance and beauty products; the role of reviews is rooted within the industry context and their influence as such should be understood in light of said industry. It is therefore important to consider the role of customer reviews within this specific industry, and this paper focuses on the online fashion industry. Research in this area is extremely limited, with papers only briefly referring to reviews but with a completely different research focus (e.g. Dawson and Kim, 2010). It is, indeed, vital for research on online customer reviews to specifically focus on the fashion industry, given that fashion and clothing are associated with high emotional involvement (Levy, 1959), as they may carry strong symbolic meaning that relates to identity and social status in addition to their use as a commodity of core value (McCracken, 1986; Solomon and Douglas, 1987).

Indeed, the role and usefulness of customer reviews are linked to the type of product or service being reviewed (e.g. hedonic vs. utilitarian) (Sen and Lerman, 2007). Li and Gery (2000) distinguish between homogenous and heterogeneous products, arguing that the former are easier to buy online. Therefore, unlike standardized books, CDs, or airline tickets that can be bought online or offline with hardly any variation, clothing may have variations in attributes such as style, color, texture or size when presented on a website and when finally, in the hands of the customer. However, in the case of products that are hedonistic and/or heterogeneous in nature, such as fashion items, the relevance of reviews remains unclear.

Accordingly, this paper's first focus is on the role of reviews in online fashion shopping experiences to understand how they are constructed by the online fashion shoppers. Reasons



for our selection of fashion products are twofold. First, fashion is one of the most popular industries leading in online shopping (Ashman and Vazquez, 2012; Kawaf and Tagg, 2012; Perry *et al.*, 2013), therefore, presenting tailored results that are specific to advancing this industry is important. Second, despite the high popularity of online fashion shopping this industry was not fully explored in terms of the usefulness online reviews. Dennis *et al.* (2010) is one of the very few empirical papers studying in part the issue of customer reviews in the fashion industry. They argue that within a social shopping community site, being able to read customer reviews and receive style advice improved users' purchasing choices (Dennis *et al.*, 2010). It is, however, not clear how online reviews influence consumers in general as their study's main focus is on social shopping rather than online retailing. Dawson and Kim (2010) also briefly advocate the importance of customer reviews in online fashion shopping as part of a larger study, but their argument is based on Wagner (2008), which does not specifically report on the importance of customer reviews in the specific context of online fashion shopping. Instead, Wagner's (2008) report is made within the broad context of online retailing as a whole.

## **2.2.Role of Facebook in the Online Fashion Industry**

Facebook is the most popular social media, the second most visited website in the world (Alexa, 2018). With more than 2 billion monthly active users, over 60 million businesses have set up Facebook pages to communicate with their target (Facebook, 2018); thus, transforming businesses (Vladlena *et al.*, 2015) and creating an additional marketing communications channel (Burton and Soboleva, 2011). The novelty of this channel is that businesses can use it to engage and collaborate with their consumers to encourage them to share and circulate positive sentiments, which then will increase the visibility of the business (Smith *et al.*, 2012).

Research identifies that there are four main reasons for users to participate in Facebook pages: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking and information seeking (Park *et al.*, 2009). As consumers can also create their own content and share this with others, they now have the power of controlling the conversation (Abedin and Jafarzadeh, 2013). When consumers engage with brand-related content on Facebook, their online behaviors express their ideal self rather than their actual self (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012; McGookin and Kytö, 2017). This means that users shape their behavior in a way that they believe is the ideal way of self-presentation. Smith *et al.* (2012) shows that consumers create apparel-related branded content on Facebook to support their self-presentation on profile pages. These findings signal the importance for consumers to engage with some brands and to avoid others.

In the context of fashion, consumers can interact with a Facebook page through various activities. These activities can take many shapes depending on the content type the company creates on their page. For example, if a company shares photos or videos (e.g. advertisement or behind the scenes), consumers can view these, like them, comment on them or share them on their profiles. In general, activities available for consumers include commenting on the posts (e.g. text, photo, video, link or other), sharing the posts with their own networks, watching videos, sharing own photos of the products (e.g. outfit), interacting with polls, clicking the links to obtain more information, clicking the links to purchase products or liking the page, which is sometimes referred to as becoming a member or fan of the brand.

Liking a business page on Facebook is recognized as consumers' method of identifying brands that they like, and is believed to lead to higher loyalty. As a result, consumption-related activities on Facebook become part of social life and are used for personal and social gratifications such as seeking self-status or information. Businesses can use these pages to develop relationships with customers. In order to develop such relationships, they can provide

useful content about the business, create interactive environments where users can also post and feel part of a community (Abedin and Jafarzadeh, 2013), and can use informal communication styles which increases the brand trust for familiar brands (Grétry et al., 2017). Companies can provide exclusive content or monetary incentives on their Facebook page and limit this content to those who like the page. This may help to increase likes on their pages. When companies create their content on Facebook, they mostly engage in five types of activity: direct marketing of products or services, promotion of sponsored events, surveys, informational announcements and fun postings (Dekay, 2012). Consumers who have liked the page will be notified about business posts on their homepage (i.e. news feed) whenever they log in to Facebook. It is known that among the posts that include a textual status message or a photo receives more attention from consumers compared to content containing only a link or video (Kwok and Yu, 2013). This way, business use Facebook pages to showcase their products akin to traditional product exhibitions (Athwal et al., 2018). However, the relationship between Facebook likes and consumer behavior is not clear. It is possible that some consumers who have liked a brand on Facebook do not actually interact with it, whereas others who have not liked the brand might be the loyal customers of that brand (Wallace *et al.*, 2014).

This literature review has highlighted the existing discussion with regard to using Facebook as a business and communication channel as well as critically reviewing the nature and relevance of customer reviews across industries. Therefore, in addition to exploring the role of customer reviews, this paper investigates the case of social media pages, particularly Facebook. The second aim of this study is to investigate how customers perceive brands' social media marketing activities within the context of the online fashion industry. It is worth noting that this research has not included the use of influencers or fashion haulers as it

focused mainly on anonymous reviews and Facebook pages of brands rather than those of influencers.

### **3. Methodology**

This paper adopts the theoretical foundation of Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory (PCT) in order to address the research question: "Based on Personal Construct Theory, how do online fashion shoppers construct the relevance of social media marketing activities in their online shopping experience?"

The rationale for adopting PCT is related to the affordances of such approach. PCT is a humanistic approach of inquiry that accounts for the role of the person as a whole, and sees an individual as one who is capable of learning from his or her experiences and constructions of the world. As such, PCT is presented as a suitable approach to exploring how individual consumers construct the relevance and importance of reviews and social media marketing efforts in their own experiences using their own words.

PCT is an individual's personal inquiry and a psychology of the human quest (Bannister, 1970). It views humans as experts in their own experiences, and therefore as the best source to guide us into understanding their experiences in a holistic manner (Bannister and Fransella, 1986). Whilst PCT is not a popular approach in marketing and consumer research, the method has been adopted and adapted both qualitatively and quantitatively as an exploratory tool, a tool for evaluating choices or decisions, or a method of inquiry into human perception, emotion and cognition (for example, see Kawaf & Tagg, 2017; Lemke, Clark & Wilson, 2011; Marsden & Littler, 2000; Richardson, et al. 2002; Tagg & Wilson, 2011; Walker, et al., 2003, among others). Indeed, researchers such as Kawaf and Tagg (2017) advocate the use of PCT for studying all human experiences and particularly digital customer experiences as the approach allows a level of individuality and personal understanding of such experiences. As such, PCT is adopted in this research as a suitable humanistic and structured approach to

studying how online fashion shoppers construct the relevance of social media marketing activities in their online shopping experience.

The methodological companion of PCT is the repertory grid technique. This is a technique that has been developed by Kelly (1955) to help the individual to unveil his or her constructs and experiences. Unlike other types of measurement, the grid does not impose any content dimensions on the participants. Instead, the participants are invited to use their own words to construct their experiences and their understanding of these experiences (Bannister & Mair, 1968). Therefore, in order to critically explore consumers' perceptions of social media marketing and their relevance within the online fashion industry, a form of repertory grid structured interviews was used as discussed below.

### **3.1. Data Collection Method**

For the purpose of addressing the research question, in-depth interviews were conducted. In the first part of the interview, repertory grids were produced, the second part then followed an unstructured in-depth interview style. In this section, the method of repertory grid production is further explained.

Every repertory grid consists of a topic, elements, constructs, and ratings. As Jankowicz explains: "people have constructs about anything and everything. A grid is always conducted about a particular topic, with the intention of eliciting just those constructs which the person uses in making sense of that particular realm of discourse - that particular slice of their experience" (2005, p.12). The grids studied here were collected for a wider research project focusing on the online shopping experience. The participants were asked to choose the elements of the grids with respect to different web atmospherics and characteristics. Once the elements were chosen, construct elicitation began. Any means of element comparison can result in construct elicitations (e.g., dyads, triads, etc.). However, Kelly (1955) suggests the

use of triads as the most appropriate method. This study follows Easterby-Smith et al.'s Minimum Context Card Form in which "the cards are normally drawn randomly from the pack and triads are presented until time runs out or the person 'dries up'" (1996, p.9).

In this research, three elements cards were picked by each participant, who was asked to say in which way two of these cards (elements/ websites) were similar and different from the third, in terms of their own experience. The participant's answer for the similar (common factor) between two of the cards was recorded on the very left-hand side of the grid as the "emergent" pole of the construct. In contrast, the participant's answer regarding how the two cards differed from the third was recorded on the right-hand side of the same row to represent the "implicit" pole of the same construct. After eliciting the construct, each participant rated all the elements of the grid on a 5-point Likert scale of the construct itself (emergent pole represents rating of 1 and implicit pole represents rating of 5).

Another construct elicitation process called "laddering/pyramiding" follows, wherein "the person is able to indicate the hierarchical integration of their personal construct system" (Bannister et al., 1968, p.50). In this process, in-depth questioning about the initial construct ("why" and "in what way") results in further constructs (Jankowicz, 2005). Table 2 below shows an example of the resulting grid.

**<Place Table 2 about here>**

As seen in table2, the elements of the grid appear at the top of the grid, in this particular example these include: Search Facilities, Customer Reviews, Catwalk Videos, Product Image +/3D, Web Layout, Social Network Pages , etc. The elicited constructs include: (It brings a good alternative to store service – the minimum basics), (Glad and happy – disappointed), and so on. The ratings then indicate for each of the constructs above how the elements were rated. For instance, looking at the first line of the grid, the construct is (It brings a good alternative to store service – the minimum basics). The rating of 5 for 'search facility'

indicates it is rated toward the ‘minimum basics’ implicit pole of the construct, whereas ‘web design’ is rated as 1 indicating it relates to the emergent pole of the construct (e.g. ‘it brings a good alternative to store service’) and so on.

In addition, accompanying the grids, is the transcribed in-depth interviews that include the conversations in relation to all these constructs as discussed by the participants. This paper is part of a wider research project and so some of the elements of the grid (e.g. search facilities, images, catwalk videos, etc.) are not included in this particular study.

### **3.2. Research Sample**

Sampling techniques are classified into two distinctive types; probability and non-probability samples (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). While the former relies on probability theory, it is the latter that is widely used in qualitative research mostly in the form of purposive or judgmental sampling (Creswell, 2009; Goulding, 1999). Using purposive sampling, members are chosen based on the judgement of the researcher and in relation to the research problem. The selection criteria included that a person must have recurrent experiences of online fashion shopping, including purchase and post-purchase experiences, in order to participate. In addition, the participants’ familiarity with a number of online fashion retailers was an important criterion in order to avoid discussions that revolve around a single brand. This also excluded fashion shopping on generic retailing websites such as Amazon and eBay due to the wide variety of product categories that can be found on such websites. The sampling approach is in line with Goulding’s rationale that “the participants are selected because they have ‘lived’ the experience under study, and therefore sampling is planned and purposive” (1999, p 868).

A total of 25 individual repertory grid interviews were conducted (See appendix 1 for a grid example), of which 23 were recorded and analyzed. Most of the participants were within an

age range of 18-34 years old with 76% females to 24% males reflecting on the already established higher popularity of online fashion shopping among females more than males (Mintel, 2017). Appendix 1 presents a detailed table of participants information, all the participants were recruited and interviewed in the United Kingdom where online shopping is in high popularity. For the purpose of this paper, the transcribed interviews along with the repertory grids were analysed using thematic analysis, the results are explained and discussed in detail below.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Customer Reviews: No black and white; shades of grey**

The research findings challenge the effectiveness and relevance of customer reviews in online fashion shopping and show their fluid nature. Although different views and comments were made regarding customer reviews, a clear voice was unavoidably noticeable in the data that the relevance of customer reviews is a fluid concept and no framework could capture this fluidity rather it is best understood in terms of how the individuals express their views.

Various examples could be used to illustrate this point from the data, for instance one participant suggests: *“I don’t look for reviews. See if I’m buying something to do with technology, like more expensive, I’d look ... but not for clothes”* (Joe, Interview 06). Another participant, Sara, comments: *“Customer reviews ... I’d never actually looked at that at all (...) If I found something I really like and I watched the catwalk video of it and I read product information and I liked it then I’d just go ahead and buy it. I would maybe look for customer reviews in something to do with like technology or something like that but not for clothes. Because, everybody is different anyway. Not everybody like the same clothes that I like so it is not something I’d look at. [...] Even if there are negative reviews, I’d still take the risk especially if I’d been on the website before. It’s not really the end of the world. I can always return it. [...] It might make me feel uneasy or uncertain, it would be at the back of my mind*



*but I would probably still buy it*” (Sara, Interview 04).

Such quotes challenge the current view of an influential role of customer reviews in the shopping experience. This comes surprising given that existing research has strongly emphasized the importance and essential role of reviews year after year (e.g. Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Dawson and Kim, 2010; Dellarocas *et al.*, 2007; Felbermayr and Nanopoulos, 2016). Moreover, by re-examining table 2 of the example grid, the ratings of the elements (reviews and social media pages) seem to constantly attract a rating of 3 further supporting this notion of the fluid role of review in the online fashion shopping experience.

By focusing specifically on reviews in the context of fashion rather than a generic understanding of reviews across all product and service categories this research presents the following findings as an explanation to the lack of perceived relevance of reviews in online fashion shopping experience.

#### *4.1.1. Fashion and the Individuality Corollary*

One explanation of the fluidity and perceived lack of relevance of reviews in online fashion shopping experience can be explained by Kelly’s PCT individuality corollary; “People have different experiences and therefore construe events in different ways” (1955, p46). Individuality in fashion could be best explored in relation to self-presentation and identity (Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986; Solomon and Douglas, 1987), evident in the participants’ comments *‘fashion is very personal’* (Joe, Interview 06) and *‘everybody is different anyway’* (Sara, Interview 04). The individuality corollary explains the theoretical underpinning of such views; people experience fashion differently, and indeed people have different tastes, styles, personalities, body shapes and preferences; thus, making the reviews made by others less relevant and less important.

However, the relevance of reviews might be different when the reviews are made by opinion

leaders, influencers, or fashion haulers due to their influential status rather than the power of customer reviews in general (Cheng and Ho, 2015) **as credibility of the source is an important factor that influences consumers (Chakraborty and Bhat 2018)**. Accordingly, despite existing research views on fashion as a social phenomenon (Kang, 2009), this research shows, by focusing on a theory of personality, that fashion is closely relevant to the individuality of the shopper and how they construe their experiences. Fashion is down to the individual and their ‘liking’ of garments, an issue that is highly subjective. Therefore, many shoppers seem to place much less value on customer reviews on apparel websites.

#### 4.1.2. *The Lure of Free Returns*

In addition to the theoretical concept of the individuality corollary that challenges the relevance of customer reviews due to the fluidity and individuality of fashion experiences, another simple explanation is given by the participants themselves: *“even if there are negative reviews, I’d still take the risk especially if I’d been on the website before. It’s not really the end of the world. I can always return it”* (Sara, Interview 04). Indeed, the practicalities of a prospering online fashion retailing sector is the need for easy and often free return policies. Pure players have recognized that, albeit expensive, easy and free returns are a game changer for most online retailers (National Retail Association, 2016)

Accordingly, despite positive and negative reviews, with the increasingly easy and free options of returning unwanted items, the risks associated with online fashion shopping are decreasing. However, the practicality and convenience of delivery and returns do not mask some of the tension created by negative reviews; one participant explains: *“Negative reviews make me disappointed ... tension between me liking the product and the negative reviews ... I might go to actual store. If I really like it, I might take a chance ... it is also about the price. [...] I’d feel guilty if I buy something that customer reviews said it wasn’t good. Hahaha”* (Lin, Interview 08).

The emotional states Lin expressed in the case of encountering negative customer reviews despite liking the product are feelings of guilt, tension and disappointment. However, in spite of these emotions her decision remains the same, she would buy the products and deal with the consequences later. As previously discussed in the literature review section, emotional expressions in online customer reviews influence how such reviews are perceived (e.g. Felbermayr and Nanopoulos, 2016; Kim and Gupta, 2012). Accordingly, the review's value of information is argued to be compromised when using negative emotional expressions.

As the literature review highlighted the role of online reviews across a number of industries, it is interesting to see how the fashion industry compares. Whilst research on reviews in the entertainment industry (TV and movies) suggests that reviews have an important influence on consumer behavior and choice (e.g. Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2015), this research does not support that the same would apply in the case of fashion shopping. In addition, unlike the direct influence on buying decisions in the sales of bath, fragrance and beauty products (Moe and Trusov, 2011), anonymous reviews of fashion products do not influence whether or not a customer will buy the reviewed products. Some reviews may appear to have informative values that help the customer choose between sizes or colors, rather than influencing whether or not they buy the product. In this instance, the influence of reviews may have a similar effect to that of the tourism industry, in some cases, in which customers use the reviews as an aid for information searching (Smith *et al.*, 2005).

Having discussed the role of customer reviews and their relevance in online fashion shopping, the next section discusses the role of social networking business pages on Facebook and explores their relevance to online fashion shopping.

#### **4.2. Facebook for Business or Online Begging for Likes?**

The findings of this research reveal an issue of a perceived lack of sociality on social media

as well as a desire for exclusivity in fashion choices as discussed below:

#### *4.2.1. The Lack of Exclusivity in a Connected World*

Sharing on social media, namely Facebook, proved less popular than expected. The participants in this research seem to intentionally avoid sharing on Facebook the fashion products they intend to buy. Across all interviews there was no indication that any of the participants used (or will be using) the option to share a product or an outfit on Facebook. Indeed, the structure and functionality of Facebook and most fashion shopping websites allow users to easily share their outfits with their friends and network.

This sharing function has proved popular across various product categories, for example, sharing an experience of eating in a café or a restaurant, or checking in to a hotel or a holiday destination have been very popular in recent years. Yet, sharing of fashion products and outfits have not been as popular. One participant suggests *“I don’t want anyone to know where I buy my stuff from, or how much they cost me”* (Jill, Interview 12). Another participant, Liz, looked at the product page for a T-shirt she was considering buying, she noticed the links to Facebook and Twitter, and explained that she has never seen it before and that she would not interact with it (Liz, Interview 15).

An explanation to the lack of interest in sharing on Facebook is explained in another comment from a participant saying: *“I have all sorts of ‘people’ on my Facebook, but I will never ask their opinion on my clothes!”* (Isla, Interview 24). The nature of fashion and its links to identity, class and self-presentation (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012, Smith *et al.*, 2012) explains the desire for exclusivity in fashion shopping. Sharing fashion choices on Facebook intervenes with the shoppers need to maintain exclusivity in their purchase decisions.

Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) argue that the online behavior of customers on Facebook

expresses their ideal self rather than their actual self. The participants' rationale for not sharing included comments that referred to not wanting to compromise their image among their connections. On the other hand, although the findings of this paper do not show that consumers share apparel content on Facebook as Smith *et al.* (2012) suggest, an explanation is perhaps available in the same work, as they link this to self-presentation, and so avoiding sharing outfits may be for the same reason. It is the need to maintain exclusivity in fashion choices, withholding information on where an outfit is from or how much it is bought for has long been associated with fashion shopping. Therefore, it is thought that perhaps sharing outfit choices may compromise this exclusivity making a fashion choice less unique.

#### 4.2.2. *Fashion in the Like Economy*

Brand pages on Facebook seem to attract a large number of fans and followers. For instance, the Facebook page of ASOS.com had attracted more than 5.3 million likes as of early 2018. The findings of this research questions the influence of such likes and argues against their relevance. Despite liking business Facebook pages, a number of participants in this research showed no direct link between liking such pages and how they viewed a brand. Even those who like some pages explained motivations for doing so do not necessarily relate to being 'fans' of a brand. For instance, Steph expressed her detailed perspective on this matter: *"I follow a couple (...) it is useful cuz it just comes up on your homepage [Newsfeed] and you can kinda almost browsing the website without actually going on the website. You can see what's new in and if you're sitting on the bus and you're looking through Facebook on your phone, you can just look at things. It's not like you're actually shopping, so I think social network pages are quite a good idea. And it can, it lets you know about competitions and I (for some) if you like them on Facebook and enter the code using your Facebook page you get 10% off! So, umm, probably good for things like that"* (Steph, Interview 16).

This quote reveals intrinsic motivations relating to learning about fashion trends and staying

up to date on what a fashion brand has to offer. There is a factor of convenience in having continuous access to the fashion world even without intentionally starting an online shopping task. This motivation, however, fades over time for most liked pages due to overcrowded newsfeeds and declining relevance over time. In this instance, liking or following a page on Facebook does not necessarily equate to any long-term engagement or exposure; this indeed is supported by Gerlitz and Helmond's (2013) concept of the 'Like' economy and the declining relevance of such behaviors over time. The continuous push by brands to initiate a 'like' behavior also appear as an unpleasant distraction of sociality, one participant, Jack, called this type of push for likes a form of "*online begging*" in which brands are mindlessly begging for more likes despite any further value or relevance of such likes (Jack, Interview 22).

In other instances, liking and following Facebook pages of fashion brands is linked to financial motivations. For example, some participants who followed certain brands on Facebook were motivated by access to discounts, vouchers, and competitions resulting in financial gains. However, despite this, major resistance to social media marketing activities was apparent throughout the data, and mostly the participants did not believe in the so-called 'social' aspect of it. Many viewed it as another suspect way for companies to push their advertising messages onto them, a form of online begging; while others distrusted customer reviews or at least thought they were of no value to their online fashion shopping experience.

One of the illusions of the virtual world of social networking is that fans follow pages because they 'like' them, and are attached to them; that fans are proud of their relationship with the brands they like that they want to show this to their friends and relatives. However, as discussed in the literature review, the relationship between Facebook likes and consumer behavior remains unclear. This research therefore confirms Wallace *et al.*'s (2014) stance on the possibility that some consumers who like a brand on Facebook may not actually interact

with it, whereas others who have not liked it may be its most loyal customers. This might be one of the examples where consumers use Facebook for hedonic rather than utilitarian motivations, as explained in the literature (Xu *et al.*, 2012) and it is indeed strongly supported by Gerlitz and Helmond's (2013) like economy.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research critically investigated the role of social media marketing in an industry-specific context. Based on Personal Construct Theory, the research contributes to the field of fashion marketing and social media by unraveling some of the many fashion specific dimensions of online shopping experiences and its links to social Media. Unlike existing research that suggest a high relevance of both customer reviews and Facebook marketing in several industries such as entertainment, hospitality, beauty (e.g. Bigné *et al.*, 2016; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Moe and Trusov, 2011), this research brings different insights suggesting that, in the fashion industry, the relevance of such activities is uniquely different and worthy of further investigation.

Due to the nature of fashion and its association with identity, social links, and self-presentation, it seems that conventional uses of social media activities proved less effective. Specifically, this research shows that the perceived relevance of customer reviews in online fashion shopping is far from distinctive black and white, and that the fluid nature of online shopping experience as supported by Kawaf and Tagg (2017), resonates with this lack of relevance of reviews. The research presented two explanations for this, one links to 'fashion and the individuality corollary' (Kelly, 1955) and another less complex one linking to the 'lure of free returns' and the current built mechanism of easy and almost free delivery and returns resulting in drastically reduced risks.

In addition, in terms of Facebook marketing, the value of liking a business page is challenged in this research. Whilst few indicated that following such pages helps them stay up to date on

fashion trends and latest offerings, a strong voice suggested that the 'like' behavior loses relevance over time and that sometimes it is only due to financial motivations such as accessing discounts and vouchers. This is supported by Gerlitz and Helmond's (2013) concept of the like economy and the lost sociality of social media. Moreover, the issue of sharing outfits with the Facebook network has been found to be rarely relevant or effective to any of the participants of this study. Fueled by the desire to maintain exclusivity in their fashion choices and outfits the participants of this study showed no interest in this act of sharing.

Accordingly, this research contributes to a clear understanding of the perceived relevance of social media marketing activities, namely, customer reviews and Facebook pages in online fashion shopping. In light of the rise of popularity of social media marketing, it is apparent that many brands and businesses have rushed in to catch the technology wave in recent years, leaving behind any planned marketing and branding strategy. Even though one could argue that businesses have been doing such activities for years, this does not guarantee any value of such uses. Indeed, after years of embedding star ratings and customer reviews as well as links to sharing outfits on Facebook, the major fashion retailer ASOS has recently launched a new website (ASOS, 2018) omitting all reviews and Facebook links and focusing on learning and social interactions for fashion in a community based forum on a separate part of the website steering away from conventional star ratings and anonymous reviews.

Since this study adopted a research design with individual participants who were experienced in online fashion shopping, its findings can only be regarded as relevant to this population, and cannot be extended to novice shoppers who are unfamiliar with online fashion shopping. Moreover, this paper used purposive sampling to identify candidates with prior recurrent experience of online fashion shopping, a decision which might arguably influence the generalizability of the findings; an issue that further research should address. This study is



also limited to examining customers' perception of social media activities that are directly linked to a brand or a business, such as customer reviews, brand social media pages, or the options to share products on one's timeline. Other social media, such as platforms that are not connected to a retailer website, are important topics for investigation to further understand the role of social media in online fashion shopping. Examples of these include blogs and YouTube vlogs led by 'fashion haulers'. Future research may further incorporate the influence of fashion haulers and the effectiveness of their integration into online fashion websites.

## Appendix 1 – Repertory Grid Example

<Place Table 2 about here>

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