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Online Atmospherics in Second-hand Retail

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Abstract

Within the retail sector, two sections have grown drastically with the help of each other in the past decade. Those two sections include online retail and second-hand retail. Online retail has grown remarkably due to the implementation of online atmospherics. This phenomenon led to the purpose of this study: to observe the online atmospherics present in online second-hand retail. To achieve this purpose, the literature related to online retail, target audience, motivations of consumers, reselling, and online second-hand apps was explored. For this study, five online second-hand retail sites were chosen. Eighteen of the most common online atmospherics were observed to be present, not present, or unable to determine in these online second-hand retail sites. Results showed notable findings including the importance of white space. Based upon the results of this study, managerial implications are offered.

Literature Review

Introduction

With the rise of technology, online retail has become an integral part of the everyday consumer's life. The online experience not only provides consumers with convenience and a seamless experience without ever visiting a physical store but also provides consumers with numerous benefits such as online discounts, a greater variety of choices, and atmospherics. While online retail continued to grow, a second-hand clothing market began to emerge rapidly as well. Online applications like Poshmark, Ebay, and Mercari comprise a large part of the online second-hand clothing market and allow shopping second-hand to be accessible to almost every consumer. The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of the consumer shopping on online second-hand applications by observing the online atmospherics present.

Online Retail

Online retail has seen a significant rise in popularity in the past 15 years, especially as compared to traditional retail. Online shopping is one of the most universal and popular activities with over 80% of consumers in the U.S. participating (Mastercard, 2012). In the same study, the data showed that the majority of consumer purchases made online were electronics and tourism related purchases. However, the number of online consumers continues to rise in all sectors of retail as online retail becomes even more accessible and convenient for the consumer. In the second quarter of 2014, 78% of consumers in the United States 15 or older made online purchases (Comscore, 2014). In more recent years, retail has exploded, growing 6.7 percent in 2020 compared to the normal average growth rate of 4 percent. In 2021, experts forecasted that retail sales could increase anywhere between 10.5 percent and 13.5 percent (National Retail

Federation, 2021).

One of the main catalysts for the growth of online retail is the consumer acceptance and embracement of modern technology (Childers, 2001). The rise in acceptance of new technology continues to decrease the digital divide. "A digital divide is created when part of the population has access to information and communication technologies and knows how to utilize them, while another part of the population does not" (Lissitsa, 2016, p. 3). But, as people continue to accept and become familiar with modern technology, the gap between the knowledgeable and unknowledgeable becomes smaller and smaller.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has changed innumerable ways with lasting repercussions even beyond the pandemic. While online retail has been on the rise the past two decades, the pandemic caused most consumers to resort to some sort of online retail as non-essential brick and mortars were forced to close. In April of 2020, ecommerce was responsible for 19% of retail sales, a record high (National Retail Federation, 2021). Even after physical stores opened, consumers continue to enjoy the benefits of shopping online, knowing there are far less health concerns with payless options, curbside pickup, and delivery to their homes. In a study analyzing consumer shopping habits during the pandemic thus far, researchers determined the pandemic will have long lasting effects for online retail and traditional retail stores. During the pandemic, many traditional brick and mortar stores have suffered and even closed their doors for good. This suggests that shopping in brick-and-mortar stores will continue to decrease, and online retail will continue to increase. Practically, the study suggests traditional brick and mortar stores should consider extending their business online as this trend continues (Eger, 2021).

Additionally, there are other factors that play a role in the growth of online retail. One of the strategies that plays a large part in the consumer retail experience is atmospherics.

Atmospherics is "the conscious designing of space to create certain buyer effects, specifically, the designing of buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance purchase probability (Kotler, 1973, p. 50). In studies following, atmospherics cues were referred to in models like the "approach or avoidance behaviors" as the "response" (Eroglu, 2003). Studies like these concluded that atmospherics did have a significant effect on the customer in physical retail and service stores (Eroglu, 2001). In a 2001 study, researchers concluded that approach and avoidance behaviors could pertain to an online shopping context as well (Eroglu, 2001). From a follow up study in 2003, it was concluded that online atmospherics do affect the customer and increasing atmospherics can increase the pleasure levels of the customer (Eroglu, 2003). In the second-hand retail context, it was determined that the store environment significantly contributed to the consumer shopping experience (Silva, 2020).

Several studies have been conducted on online atmospherics in the online retail environment. In a study on clothing in e-retail, visual engagement was determined to be the most significant factor in impacting the satisfaction of males and females in the study (Pandey, 2018). Additionally, this was also the most significant factor related to brand loyalty in females (Pandey, 2018). E-convenience and e-enjoyment were found to have a positive impact for women and interactivity for men (Pandey, 2018). In another study, researchers determined that the freeform layout is best for online fashion retailers as it is, "pleasant, entertaining, and stimulating" for consumers (Roberts, 2021, p. 443). While other layouts might be better suited for utilitarian purposes, it was determined that the freeform layout is best for hedonic shopping, embodied by the fashion industry (Roberts, 2021, p. 445). The same study also considered visual and aural atmospherics. The atmospherics were categorized as, "external variables, internal variables, layout and design factors, point of purchase elements and consumer service." To

compensate for the lack of tactile stimuli, the study suggests enlarged images and modeled clothing. They also found that aural stimuli is important for the online retail experience. However, many websites do not employ aural stimuli to its maximum potential (Roberts, 2021). Another study concluded the type of atmosphere required for a positive consumer impact depends on the targeted consumer and their buying intentions. For example, bargain shoppers are greatly impacted by the experiential atmosphere and hedonic aspects. Other consumers looking for something simple, possibly utilitarian, would find the hedonic aspects to be distracting and would be negatively impacted by them (Hunter, 2011).

Target Audience

Although it can be concluded that online retail is arguably becoming almost universal across the U.S., not all consumers have the same purchasing mindset when it comes to online retail. For example, one study compared Gen X's methods and motivations in relation to online shopping versus those of Gen Y. It was found that Gen X was more traditional in their online retail methods. These consumers are thorough in their research of products in terms of combing through reviews, detailed descriptions, and multiple retailers. Gen X consumers value quality brand, convenience, and community relationships. On the other hand, Gen Y consumers view shopping as more of an experience or hobby than a means to an end. They also are more likely to make buy things impulsively as compared to Gen Y. Gen Y values products that fit their aesthetic or personality over brand. This exemplifies the challenges to marketers and retailers to accommodate consumer needs (Lissitsa, 2016).

Motivations

Shopping online has become more than just a means to an end for some consumers. Instead of having utilitarian motivations only, some consumers also have hedonic motivations as well (Childers, 2001). The hedonic motivation would be the pleasure or stimulus a consumer derives from shopping. In some cases, consumers are looking for purely hedonic motivation with no utilitarian motivations. This would be called "window shopping" which can be a frequent hobby or even stress reliever for consumers. One consumer describes it as such, "I enjoy looking around and imagining what one day, I would actually have money to buy. Shopping. . . is an adventure (Sherry, 1990, p. 14)." This motivation is becoming increasingly more popular among consumers of all age groups and contributes greatly to the rise of online retail.

Reselling

Like online retail, niche categories of retail continue to emerge, such as second-hand retail. In 1960, consignment, thrift, and other second-hand shops were deemed to be official businesses. Since then, many other second-hand options have emerged such as Ebay, Craigslist, auctions, and vintage shops. All of these businesses operate differently in how they source and sell second-hand clothing. Consignment shops sell name-brand or higher-end clothing on behalf of others and share a percentage of the sale with these individuals once the item sells. Thrift stores source inventory for free through donations and usually sell the clothing cheaply. Buy-sell-trade stores, like Plato's Closet, purchase items from individuals for a lower cost and resell them for more. Depending on the buy-sell-trade store, the commission and the amount that the item will sell for can vary greatly. While Millennials possess great spending power and are typically targeted by fast fashion companies and second-hand clothing stores alike, there are a

range of customers that shop second-hand (Sorensen, 2019). One study found that customers who shop at second-hand clothing stores are largely women of varied ages, from teenagers and college students to middle aged and even older women (Gopalakrishnan, 2017). With such a large and growing customer base, the second-hand clothing market was expected to grow from and $18 billion industry in 2019 to a $33 billion dollar industry in 2021 (Sorensen, 2019).

Since second-hand clothing appeals to such a wide customer base, there are many underlying consumer motivations to be explored. A study conducted on Millennial perceptions of second-hand clothing and fast fashion concluded that Millennials perceive second-hand clothing to be durable and affordable (Sorensen, 2019). Another study found women who shop at second-hand stores are normally motivated by the discounted prices, unique pieces, and the excitement of finding a desirable piece for a good deal (Gopalakrishnan, 2017). A large motivation for consumers who shop second-hand is the desire to shop sustainably and avoid supporting fast fashion brands (Silva, 2020). In 1997, only 10% of respondents to a survey indicated that they consider the environment in their clothing consumption decisions (Joyner Armstrong, 2016). However, Millennials are much more concerned with sustainability than previous generations (Sorensen, 2019). Fast fashion brands make up the majority of clothing brands and produce copious amounts of lower-quality products. These brands also thrive on ever evolving micro trends which encourage overconsumption and waste (Silva, 2020). These brands are not only relying on clothing to meet the physical needs of the customer, but also rely on consumer motivations driven by social status and culture (Joyner Armstrong, 2016). One study found that experienced second-hand consumers were motivated by sustainability as well as cheaper prices. In this same study, the motivations of brand and style were not found to be statistically significant motivations (Silva, 2020).

Although there are many motivations for consumers to shop second-hand, there are still equally as many barriers stopping others from doing so. In the same study conducted on Millennial perceptions of fast fashion and second-hand clothing, it was determined that Millennials also perceived second-hand clothing to be unexciting, not valuable, and not unique (Sorenson, 2019). In a study relating to sustainability, researchers found that certain barriers keep consumers from trying to shop second-hand including: embarrassment and the stigma of being connected to the lower income classes, perceived hygiene concerns, and lack of knowledge about the origin of a garment and its quality (Silva, 2020). These are just some of the barriers mentioned by those who refrain from shopping second-hand for their clothing.

Online Second-hand Retail Apps

In the past decade, the demand and use of online second-hand apps has skyrocketed. In 2017, Poshmark accumulated $160 million in financing and was valued at $625 million with a 70% growth in sales that year. The company was founded in 2011, six years prior to this accomplishment. In 2017, the app had over 40 million users and about 5 million of those were also sellers on the platform. One of the things Poshmark aims to do is combine the social environment of an app like Instagram with an aesthetic app like Pinterest and create a space where users can enjoy these benefits and also buy new and used clothing. These benefits and features largely accrue to consumers or buyers. However, for the sellers, Chandra, one of the founders, decided to make the app accessible to all types of people and create a space where people could make some extra money. This was a timely decision as many people were looking to do so after the Great Recession. Other second-hand marketplaces like the RealReal and ThredUp also took advantage of this opportunity. However, apps provide more opportunities for

the individual seller. For example, Suzanne Canon earned the honor of being the first seller on

Poshmark to reach $1 million in sales. She and her business partner went on to open their own

brick and mortar store as well (Carson, 2018).

Demand only continues to increase for these platforms. According to the National Retail

Federation, 90% of offline shoppers are looking for some sort of discount or deal on clothing

(Carson, 2018). Although Poshmark has a massive number of users and popularity in the U.S.,

multiple online second-hand retail platforms have popped up in the last few years such as

Mercari, Curtsy, Depop, Tradesy, Facebook Marketplace, etc. Although Ebay precedes

Poshmark, the platform has continued to grow tremendously with users all over the world. Each

platform is designed a bit differently to meet buyer or seller needs. These differences range from

fee structure to search optimization to aesthetics among other differences.

In comparison with traditional retail stores, online second-hand platforms are able to offer

clothing for those who are brand loyal as well as clothing for those who are more focused on

their personal style. As more brands and trends emerge, all generations value the options

provided by second-hand platforms. However, there are some disadvantages to shopping on

these second-hand platforms. One notable disadvantage is that most second-hand platforms do

not offer returns unless the item is damaged, not as described, etc. The window for returns is

often much shorter, and thus some buyers miss the opportunity. For those with a low risk

tolerance, such as Generation X, this might be unappealing. Even return policies are not as

favorable as those of traditional retailers, some platforms do allow returns such as the RealReal,

ThredUp, and Tradesy. This is another example of just how many differnet second-hand

platforms exist and how each one could be a perfect fit for a specific consumer ("What is

Poshmark's Return Policy," 2021).

Given the increase in online retailing, specifically online resellers, and the related factors such as demographics, target audience, and motivation, the purpose of this study is to examine the experience of the consumer shopping in online second-hand applications by observing the online atmospherics present. Therefore, the study is guided by the following research question: What online atmospherics are present in second-hand retail applications?

Methodology

Introduction

   With the rise of online retail, copious amounts of research and scientific study have focused on the components, behaviors, and strategies of ecommerce. More specifically, atmospherics of ecommerce sites have also been the focus of many studies. However, there is a significant gap within the literature regarding the atmospherics of online secondhand marketplaces. This study is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature. The following section describes the methods utilized the obtain data and the procedures used to analyze the data.

Research Design

   The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of the consumer shopping on online second-hand applications by observing the online atmospherics present. The context for this study included the online sites for Poshmark, thredUP, the Real Real, Grailed, and StockX. These sites were chosen from the report titled "The Fashion Resale Industry: Digital Trends" which set forth the resale sites which received the most traffic (N.A., 2019). These same applications and sites are also discussed by leaders and emerging leaders in the resale industry in the WWD article "The Resale Market: Who's Playing, Who's Leading, Who's Emerging" (Roshitsh, 2021). Atmospherics were tested in 2015 and results indicate that five main types of atmospheric variables exist: external variables, internal variables, design and layout variables, point of purchase, and customer service. The external variables of availability of return policy, customer service information, and special offers were examined on each platform. The internal variables of ability to shop by department, brand name, size, and price were analyzed. White

space, photos, text, and primary color scheme were taken into account for the design and layout variables. Point of purchase atmospherics for this study included financing option, additional purchase suggestions, total cost of purchase, and price of an item. Finally, customer service variables were included a save for later option, ability to store payment information, and the option to ship to another address (Hassouneh & Brengman, 2015). Through the use of content analysis each atmospheric was coded utilizing a numerical scale for each atmospheric present. For this study, white space will be defined as taking up fifty percent of the available area on the site.

Category 1: Atmospheric element
0 = atmospheric is present
1 = atmospheric is not present
2 = unable to determine

Subjects

The subjects of this study were the reselling applications previously identified. The atmospherics include external variables, internal variables, design and layout variables, point of purchase, and customer service. Each of these variables were coded using the specific atmospherics identified in the previous section.

Data Collection Procedure

Each application was assessed individually for the atmospherics present. The coder analyzed the application and coded for external variables, internal variables, design and layout variables, point of purchase, and customer service. An intercoder reliability test was used to test

for accuracy of coding. The inter-reliability test showed a 95% agreement or better on all variables."

Data Analysis Procedure

After each site and app were coded for the atmospherics present, the data were analyzed to determine results. The scores analyzed included the subtotals for the categories of atmospherics and the grand total for each application. The application with the highest score was determined to have the most atmospheric qualities present.

Discussion and Managerial Implications

In this study, certain atmospherics were determined to be present in these sites. The atmospherics analyzed in the current study included: availability of return policy, customer service information, special offers, ability to shop by department, brand name, size, price, white space, photos, text, primary color scheme, financing option, additional purchase suggestions, total cost of purchase, price of an item, save for later option, ability to store payment information, and the option to ship to another address Poshmark had the following atmospherics present: availability of return policy, ability to shop by department, ability to shop by brand name, ability to shop by size, ability to shop by price, photos, text, financing option, total cost of purchase, price of item, save for later option, ability to store payment information, and the option to send to another address. The atmospherics not present on Poshmark were: customer service information, special offers, and primary color scheme. The atmospherics of white space and additional purchase suggestions were not able to be determined for Poshmark. On thredUP, the atmospherics present were: availability of return policy, customer service information, special offers, ability to shop by department, ability to shop by brand name, ability to shop by size, ability to shop by price, white space, photos, text, financing option, additional purchase suggestions, total cost of purchase, price of item, save for later option, ability to store payment information, and the option to send to another address. The atmospherics not present on thredUP were: primary color scheme. The Real Real had the following atmospherics present: availability of return policy, customer service information, special offers, ability to shop by department, ability to shop by brand name, ability to shop by size, ability to shop by price, white space, photos, text, financing option, additional purchase suggestions, total cost of purchase, price of

item, save for later option, ability to store payment information, and the option to send to another

address. The atmospherics not present on the Real Real were: primary color scheme. On Grailed,

the atmospherics listed were determined to be present: availability of return policy, customer

service information, ability to shop by department, ability to shop by brand name, ability to shop

by size, ability to shop by price, photos, text, additional purchase suggestions, total cost of

purchase, price of item, save for later option, ability to store payment information, and the option

to send to another address. The atmospherics not present on Grailed were: special offers, primary

color scheme, and financing option. For this site, white space was unable to be determined if it

was present. For StockX, the atmospherics present were: customer service information, ability to

shop by department, ability to shop by brand name, ability to shop by size, ability to shop by

price, white space, photos, text, additional purchase suggestions, price of item, save for later

option, ability to store payment information, and the option to send to another address. The

atmospherics not present on StockX were: special offers, primary color scheme, financing

option, and total cost of purchase. Availability of return policy was the only atmospheric for this

platform unable to be determined. (See Table A.)

Table A

Presence of Online Atmospherics on Reseller Sites

Site	Availability of return policy	Customer service info	Special Offers	Ability to shop by department	Ability to shop by brand name	Ability to shop by size	Ability to shop by price	White space	Photos	Text	Primary color scheme	Financing option	Additional purchase suggestions	Total cost of purchase	Price of item	Save for late option	Ability to store payment information	Option to ship to another address
Poshmark (13/18)	P	NP	NP	P	P	P	P	U	P	P	NP	P	U	P	P	P	P	P
thredUP (17/18)	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	NP	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
the Real Real (17/18)	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	NP	P	P	P	P	P	P	P
Grailed (14/18)	P	P	NP	P	P	P	P	U	P	P	NP	NP	P	P	P	P	P	P
StockX (13/18)	U	P	NP	P	P	P	P	P	P	P	NP	NP	P	NP	P	P	P	P
Total (N=90)																		
P	present																	
NP	not present																	
U	unable to determine																	

All sites utilized atmospherics in some capacity. ThredUP and the Real Real used the most atmospherics, with 17 out of the 18 being present. StockX and Poshmark employed the least amount of atmospherics, with 13 out of the 18 analyzed. Grailed used 14 out of the 18 atmospherics analyzed. Color was not an atmospheric found in the analysis of these sites. Instead, white space dominated the background of each site. Special offers were only present on two platforms, and financing options only occurred on three platforms. All of the other atmospherics tested were generally evenly disbursed and incorporated.

Based on the results of the content analysis performed, several managerial implications may be posited. First, the implications of the lack of primary color in these platforms is an indication of the minimalist style in this industry. Since these sites are displaying so many different pieces of clothing, they most likely do not want any additional color distracting from the items they are trying to sell. The prominence of white space is also connected to this concept. For the sites that control the photos posted, white space did account for at least 50% of the space. These sites were thredUP (Image 2), the Real Real (Image 3) and StockX (Image 4) On the other sites, Poshmark (Image 1) and Grailed (Image 5), the portions of the site designed by those platforms is still predominately white. Some sellers on these sights choose to use white backgrounds or white borders on their cover photos which increases the white space.
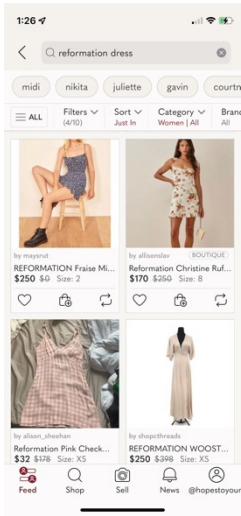
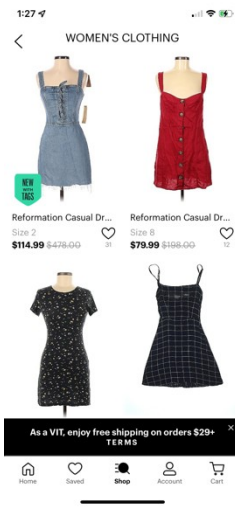Image 1 - Poshmark   Image 2 - thredUP   Image 3 – the Real Real
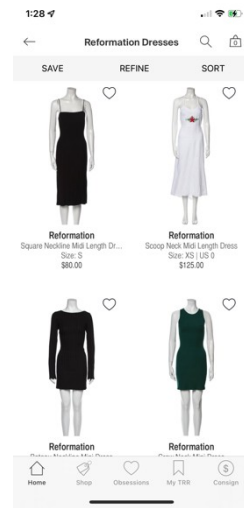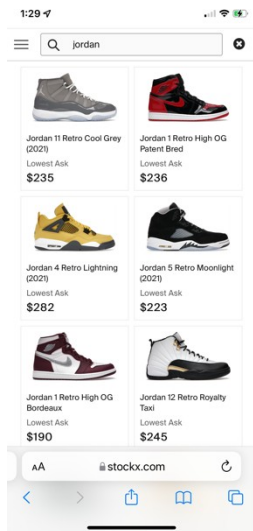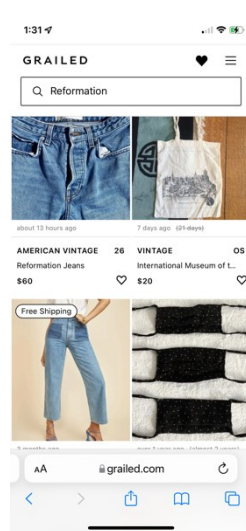

Image 4 - StockX   Image 5 - Grailed

The use of white space may also be correlated to clickthrough rates. Since studies have shown white as being connected to simplicity, purity, and cleanliness, secondhand sites such as the ones analyzed, may deliberately avoid distracting color schemes. However, it may be suggested that, since color is a powerful mechanism in the online environment, digital marketing managers should consider using color to their benefit to increase sales, evoke positive emotions, and build consumer trust.

A financing option could make a great difference in whether a buyer can afford to purchase an item. This feature caters to the impulsive purchasing decisions associated with Gen Y. The save for later option should be emphasized when considering the motivations of buyers. If buyers intend to window shop and possibly purchase later, giving them an option to save their favorites is crucial. Finally, digital marketing managers should continue to investigate the use of technology and other online atmospherics to enhance their sites. Given the increasing availability of technologies such as virtual reality, consumers increasingly are looking for online shopping venues which will result in a pleasurable and productive shopping experience.

Conclusion

In this study, the prominence of white space was one of the main findings. Given the importance of color in online atmospherics, it is important to note not only how white space affects the online second-hand industry, but also how the presence of color could add value to said industry. Some other key findings include how the financing option and save for later options are connected to the motivations of shoppers. The following were determined to be

limitations in the study. First, the sample size was relatively small. Since this study utilized content analysis, the report did not delve into any "why" questions regarding the content. One cannot answer why the atmospheric elements were designed or presented as they were without interviewing the site or app designer. Another limitation relates to the fact that content analysis shows only a moment in time and cannot show the state of the sites after this study was conducted. To address these limitations, future research is encouraged. Additionally, more atmospherics could be reviewed on these secondhand sites in future research as well as exploring digital stores and virtual reality options. In this study, online atmospherics were identified in second-hand sites. From these online atmospherics present, implications were made from the results of these observations. Therefore, this study make a considerable contribution to the literature of online atmospherics in relation to secondhand retail.

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