

Chapter 17

Technical and Hedonistic Variables of Online Visual Merchandising: Do They Influence Apparel Website Popularity and Attractiveness?

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ABSTRACT

This study looks for a correlation between visual hedonistic and technical variables and site success, simultaneously establishing whether there are any recorded evolutionary aspects of technical variables. A mixed method approach was adopted and the analysis was divided into the following phases: content analysis on technical and hedonistic characteristics; traffic analysis, analysis of the position of websites in relation to data traffic using a size reduction technique; cross-analysis of results obtained in the two previous phases to observe the cluster structure from a point of view of data traffic. The results state that there is no clear correlation between technical and hedonistic qualities of an e-commerce site in the apparel industry and the popularity and attractiveness of their site, and therefore, the authors cannot confirm the four proposed hypotheses.

INTRODUCTION

There are certain fundamental factors in the retail mix, including; assortment, price, communication, and location. In particular, for in-store communication, visual merchandising plays a fundamental role. However, there has been a recent shift towards an omnichannel approach due to the need for retailers for greater integration between company areas, such as marketing, innovations, and customer services. Consequently, an important question is, ‘are the same factors involved in the success of both online and offline stores? More specifically, ‘is it possible to state that the role of visual online sales is the same as an offline sales point? Here, the authors looked for a correlation between visual hedonistic and technical variables and site success, simultaneously establishing whether there are any recorded evolutionary aspects of technical variables.

Recently, research has analyzed different variables that can affect the propensity of consumers to buy clothing online (Choi, 2016; Cho and Workman, 2015; Merle et al., 2012; Hagberg et al., 2016; Melis, et al., 2015; Sundström et al., 2019). According to Shala and Balay (2016), the success of online channels depends on their quality of service. The main factor that influences these authors is the perceived risk of consumers of the lack of “materiality” of stores. This, in turn, induces customers to buy online only based on knowledge of the product’s brand. The term “quality of service” refers to the value gap between consumers’ expectations regarding service and the actual perception of this service after the purchase experience (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

To measure the quality of electronic services, defined in the eTail Quality study, the following aspects were taken into consideration (Shala and Balay 2016):

- *Satisfaction/reliability*, the visualization, and accurate description of the product reassuring consumers to order what they want (Wolfenbarger and Gilly 2003).
- *Website design*, all relevant elements for a positive virtual experience, such as smooth navigation, information search, order processing, the possibility of personalization, and selection of products.
- *Customer service*, the care that online sellers show in offering consumers immediate solutions to problems that the customer may encounter while browsing (Wolfenbarger and Gilly 2003).
- *Security/privacy*, the security level of credit card payments, and consumer data protection.

Cho and Workman (2011) analyzed on the other hand, how consumers prefer to buy items of clothing in physical stores or online in relation to the need to touch products (need for touch), the aesthetic centrality of the product and genre. According to these authors, consumers who have a great need to have a tactile examination of the product will go exclusively to physical stores and will never be an online target.

From their study, it also emerged that:

- It is not just the image of an individual product that induces consumers to buy online, but also the appearance of the online store which affects their final decision;
- A potential consumer who comes across a store full of exciting and interesting elements could reduce their perception of risk and perceive the online shopping experience to be much more pleasant (Ha and Lennon 2011);
- Women tend to prefer purchasing in physical stores, and only very few make purchases online because of the absence of social interaction (Hasan, 2010). Furthermore, women shop for fun (Almaghrabi and Dennis, 2010).

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