



Older Women's Experience with Online Apparel Shopping

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With the steady growing number of online shoppers, e-commerce sales account for 225.5 billion dollars in the United States (eMarketer, 2013). Forrester (2013) anticipates that the growth of online sales will outperform the sales growth in offline after five years. Clothing is one of the most popular product categories of online shopping and makes up a significant amount of the total online sales in the United States (eMarketer, 2013).

The U.S. Bureau of the Census (2010) expects that the older population will constitute about 20 percent of the total U.S. population in 2050. With rapidly increasing numbers of baby boomers moving into the older population, the older market has attracted attention from fashion retailers because of their higher purchasing power and growing numbers (Holmlund, Hagman, & Palsa, 2011). In spite of the importance of older consumers in the fashion market, there has been little research of apparel shopping of older consumers. In particular, few studies have been conducted on older women's online apparel shopping. The number of internet users who are over 55 years old is continuously growing, and they play a significant role in the recent growth of internet shoppers (McGann, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore older women's experiences with online apparel shopping and to increase understanding of how older women shop for apparel online. Research questions were: (1) How do older women experience online apparel shopping? (2) What are the factors that encourage older women to do online apparel shopping? (3) What are the concerns and difficulties that older women have when they shop for apparel products online? (4) How do older women decide whether they will buy apparel products online? And (5) How can online fashion retailers better serve older women?

Method. In a qualitative study, in-depth, face-to-face interviews and observations were conducted with 13 women who were 66 to 73 years of age and had experience purchasing apparel products online at least three times within the two years prior to 2014. The participants were first interviewed and then observed while they navigated a favorite apparel website and talked about the experience. Interviews were transcribed, inductively searched for themes, and coding was checked by another coder. Intercoder agreement was 96%.

Results. Most women included in this study were active online shoppers, who had positive experiences purchasing apparel products online. They did not have substantial problems with online apparel shopping, and they felt comfortable with it. Participants were motivated to do online apparel shopping because of the advantages of online shopping, such as convenience, lower prices, and variety of product offerings. They also were motivated to shop for apparel online by other shopping channels, including mailed catalogs and stores. Their online apparel shopping was often more focused than it would have been in a store where more browsing might occur. Spending extensive time browsing online was not emphasized by the women in the study.

All the participants in this study were concerned about the fit of garments when they did online apparel shopping due to the inconsistency of sizes among brands. They also were concerned about the accuracy of information in websites, the return process, and the security of electronic payments. Participants were more willing to buy apparel online when they knew what size they needed. They reduced their concerns regarding fit and size of garments through online consumers' reviews and ratings. Shipping information and good return policy also had a significant impact. The features of the websites (e.g., interactive technologies and product suggestions) were positively associated with their intentions for shopping and purchasing apparel products online and from specific websites. During the observations, suggestions for online fashion retailers also were revealed. Some themes were similar to those found by Holmlund et al. (2011) in their study of middle aged Finnish women 50-63 years old: Fit concerns, choice of brands/retailers with which they were familiar, less time for shopping offline, and online stores helping them to find apparel that fits their needs and preferences. As found by Rocha, Hammond, and Hawkins (2005), the older women showed preferences and patterns of purchase for apparel products online that may differ from those of younger consumers.

Conclusions. In the present study older women had similar motivations for and concerns with online apparel shopping as have younger consumers in previous studies, but they had some shopping patterns that may differ from those of younger consumers for online apparel shopping (e.g., needs, styles, sizes, and possibly search and ordering patterns). In particular, their lack of interest in extensive browsing online may differentiate older shoppers from younger shoppers. Further comparison is needed. The findings of this study advance understanding of older women's online apparel shopping and also have practical implications for fashion retailers who target older women.

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