

No Longer in Vogue? The Exploration of Motivations Underlying Millennials' Information Seeking Through Digital Fashion Media

Aimee Jones and Jiyun Kang, Texas State University, USA

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**Research Purpose and Significance:** Information seeking is a key component of the consumer decision making process (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). During this phase, consumers sift through information to enhance their knowledge and develop their attitudes toward a good or service before making a purchase decision. In this phase, consumers utilize a variety of sources for information seeking. Traditional media, such as fashion magazines, were once the premier source of fashion information acquisition for consumers. Recent statistics, however, demonstrate a decline in the print sales of fashion magazines (Lulofs, 2014), while usage rates of social media have dramatically increased (Pew Research Center, 2015). Such data exemplifies that the nature of information seeking has changed with increased digitalization. *Digital fashion media*, including fashion blogs and relevant social media platforms (e.g., Pinterest, Instagram, and Snapchat), are now becoming the chosen fashion information source for consumers, especially millennials. Despite this significant change in information seeking, academic literature has primarily focused on information givers' perspectives (e.g., creating and posting user-generated content on blogs and social media) (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2014; Sedeke & Payal, 2013; Wang & Li, 2014). However, the literature has paid little attention to information seekers' standpoints. Therefore, the question "Why do young consumers turn to digital media as opposed to traditional media when they seek fashion-related information?" remains largely unanswered. To address this question, the authors explore millennial consumers' motivations for utilizing digital media over traditional media for fashion information seeking based on Katz's functional theory (1960).

**Methods:** Given the lack of relevant empirical studies, a qualitative approach was necessary to provide an in-depth understanding of the psychological motivations underlying the specific consumer behavior of interest. Six focus group interviews (FGIs) were conducted with a total of 24 females aged 18-33 who fit the millennial age category (four participants/group on average). Participants were recruited from fashion merchandising courses at a southwestern university to ensure that participants had an interest in fashion and would be actively engaged in discussion (a follow-up survey confirmed participants' high level of fashion involvement). Interviews were recorded and transcribed using pseudonyms to protect participant privacy. Participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview, and after the interview, each was compensated with a \$25 gift card. Each FGI session lasted approximately 1.5 hours. Interviews were coded using thematic analysis, and six key phases of transcription were undertaken (c.f., Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Results and Discussion:** Based on the qualitative inquiry followed by rigorous thematic analysis, six themes emerged as key motivations: *search autonomy*, *visual inspiration*, *virtual storage*, *instant gratification*, *gratuitous information*, and *authenticity*. Each of these emergent

themes was framed by Katz's functional theory (1960). Functional theory has typically been used in sociology, and it premises that any given attitude serves one or more distinct personality functions: adjustment, ego defense, value expression, and knowledge. The first theme, *search autonomy*—the motivation for searching for information with full control—is relevant to the “adjustment” function in functional theory, which states that there needs to be a better path to satisfaction. Consumers who have autonomy over their searches can maximize the rewards by receiving the exact information they require, thus creating a better path to satisfaction. *Visual inspiration*—consumers' preference for visual cues instead of written information—is supported by the “value expression” function. Through this function, visual inspiration allows the consumer to reassert their self-concept and express values when using digital fashion media. They can utilize digital fashion media to inspire their lives. Millennials prefer information from images rather than text, as they have become acclimated to visual media and now prefer information presented quickly. *Instant gratification*—the motivation for speed, accuracy, and ease of information seeking via digital media—is relevant to the “adjustment” function. Through “adjustment,” instant gratification provides a better path to satisfaction through the instantaneous search aspect, as well as digital media's ease of use. *Virtual storage*—the ability to digitally store their information searches—can be understood through the “knowledge” function; knowledge requires more meaningful information about a problem, which virtual storage fulfills. A user can easily go to where their information is stored, should they find themselves facing the same problem again. *Gratuitous information*—information that is free to consumers without any hidden fees—is related to the “adjustment” function. Consumers are provided with infinite amounts of information for free on digital media, and this creates a better path to satisfaction (per the adjustment function requirements). Millennials are extremely price-conscious; therefore, gratuitous information was highly appreciated and the main reason for millennials' avoidance of magazines. Finally, millennials were more likely to trust the information on digital fashion media, as they were deterred by any notion of commercialization—they valued *authenticity*. This is relevant to “ego defense,” because consumers avoid threats and external dangers through their acceptance of information given to them by other trusted consumers e.g. fashion bloggers. Their distrust of commercialized bloggers and corporations eliminates the external danger of receiving information that is deemed to be biased.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications:** This study contributes to building a rigor to the functional theory as it is extended to consumer psychology, especially underlying information seeking behaviors in the current digitalized world. The results provide useful managerial implications for both fashion magazines and digital fashion media. Editors of fashion magazines can attempt to restore readership by increasing the creativity of visual-oriented content, being more selective with advertising, and providing incentives for subscription. Managers of digital fashion media can maintain and increase user traffic by responding to their customers' urgent needs of increasing application interactivity. In addition, they should continue to provide consumers with complete autonomy over all their informational needs, including complete ease of use from trusted sources and with no hidden fees.

*Note:* Due to the page limit, the full list of references will be provided by the authors upon request.