



# Fashion brands on retail websites: Customer performance expectancy and e-word-of-mouth

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## ABSTRACT

The current study explores the drivers and outcomes of performance expectancy for fashion brand websites and estimates two alternative models to explain the drivers of word-of-mouth. The study also aims to test the mediator effect of trust on the relationship between customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth. The study builds on data collection from consumers selected through mall intercept convenience sampling (in Lisbon city center). Researchers gave consumers tablets which they used to answer the online survey. The final sample consisted of 312 participants. The findings of this research may generate a flow process in which the quality of the information and technology of the fashion website, together with the past experience of the fashion consumer, influence the performance expectancy and this, in turn, contributes to them recommending the fashion brand and the website through online posts and reviews.

## 1. Introduction

Consumers are increasingly meeting and interacting in online settings, such as in fashion brands on retail websites. A fashion brand is a “name, term, design, symbol or any other feature” (AMA, 2017) dedicated to clothes, accessories and other fashion items. The practice of resorting to combinations of different platforms is becoming common among consumers so that they can obtain information and recommendations about brands, remain informed and make their purchase decisions (Berthon et al., 2012).

By the same token, brands are increasingly investing in online customer-interaction technologies (e.g. websites, blogs, social networks) in an effort to increase their connection and build relationships with consumers (Rowley, 2009). Brands are improving website design, the interaction experience (e.g., Moss et al., 2006; Andrews and Bianchi, 2013; Toufaily et al., 2013; Alden et al., 2016; Jung and Seock, 2017; Algharabat et al., 2017) and credibility (e.g., Park and Lee, 2008; Sparks and Browning, 2011) to enhance consumer behavior (Eroglu et al., 2003). Currently, Loureiro and Breazeale (2016) highlight the exponential growth of Internet penetration in Western Europe and the importance of clothing and sporting goods as one of the most common trends in online purchases. Fashion brands are becoming more active, using websites, social media and other digital technologies (Dhaoui,

2014).

Several authors have consistently argued that consumers trust recommendations from peers more than professionally written content in websites and other online platforms (websites, blogs, social networks, online brand communities) (Smith et al., 2005; Baier and Stüber, 2010). In return, consumers like to post their own comments, share their experiences and recommend brands to other. They are becoming the voice of the brands. Fashion brands are using the online platforms to interact with consumers and create new fashion items (Tynan et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2015).

Several previous studies have examined factors that could help consumers perform certain online activities (performance expectancy), such as social influence (e.g., Kim and Park, 2011), past experience (e.g., Andrews and Bianchi, 2013) or the content quality and design of the website (e.g., Aladwani and Palvia, 2002; Dickinger and Stangl, 2013). Other studies have explored online shopping behavior and the consequences of greater performance expectancy (e.g., McKechnie et al., 2006; Ha and Stoel, 2009; Smith et al., 2013; Chang et al., 2016).

Online trust has also been identified as a critical element in consumer intentions in the online context (e.g., Jarvenpaa et al., 2000; Yoon, 2002; Flavián et al., 2006; Mallapragada et al., 2016), particularly in apparel and fashion brand retailing (Kim and Stoel, 2004; O’Cass and Carlson, 2012). However, as far as we know this is the first

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attempt to go further and analyze how perceived fashion website quality, social influence and recommendation, source credibility and experience influence fashion consumer behavior, considering performance expectancy as the core element of online trust, satisfaction and word-of-mouth. Thus, the current study goes further than previous research and jointly considers all the independent variables that could influence performance expectancy, thus contributing to the extension of the Unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT).

This article aims to: (i) explore the drivers and outcomes of performance expectancy for fashion brand websites; (ii) develop a comparison between two models, one considering the first-order conceptualization and another the second-order formative conceptualization; and (iii) test the mediating effect of trust on the relationship between customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth.

## 2. Theoretical background and development of the hypotheses

The current study is based on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The UTAUT comprises of four main constructs that influence behavioral intention: performance expectancy, facilitation conditions, social influence, and effort expectancy. Based on Brown and Venkatesh (2005) and Venkatesh et al. (2003), performance expectancy (PE) means that using online technology helps consumers perform certain activities (e.g., information search and other tasks in purchasing processes). Facilitation conditions (FC) reflects a consumer's perception of their control over behavior (Venkatesh et al., 2008). Social influence (SI) is the consumer's belief in the influence of others who think that they should use an online platform, such as blogs or websites (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Effort expectancy (EE) represents the level of ease associated with the use of online platforms (Venkatesh et al., 2003). These constructs have exerted effects of different strengths on behavioral intentions. For instance, Alawadhi and Morris (2008) find that performance expectancy, effort expectancy and peer influence determine students' behavioral intentions. Another study has also revealed that performance expectancy and effort expectation are strong predictors of behavioral intention, whereas social influence's predictive power seems to be low in the case of medical staff (Biemans et al., 2005). Foon and Fah's (2011) study considers facilitating conditions to be significant in predicting intention.

In the context of internet banking, Al-Qeisi et al. (2014) show that the direct effect of effort expectancy on internet banking usage is non-significant when performance expectancy is included as an intervening variable, highlighting the importance of performance expectancy compared to effort expectancy. In the current study, we explore the antecedents of performance expectancy in the context of the online fashion industry. Here we do not consider the effort expectancy variable. Effort expectancy is conceptually equivalent to ease of use (Al-Qeisi et al., 2014) and we embedded this meaning in website content quality and even in website technical quality. Moreover, Al-Qeisi et al. (2014) find that performance expectancy is more important in explained website usage than effort expectancy, particularly when we are dealing with participants that regularly use the websites, as is the case of our study (a sample of participants that regularly use fashion websites).

The experience variable is not directly used as an antecedent of behavioral intentions in the case of UTAUT model (Brown and Venkatesh, 2005; Venkatesh et al., 2003). Yet, the knowledge and expertise gained through usage experience of certain websites (internet experience and past experience) can influence the use of technology (Lassar et al., 2005; Toufaily et al., 2013). Fashion consumers with more experience in searching for fashion brands and products, as well as purchasing fashion brands online, may form more positive perceptions of performance expectancy than less experienced fashion website user. We therefore consider the effect of experience on performance expectancy in our model.

Finally, we extend the UTAUT by considering source credibility as an antecedent of performance expectancy. Source credibility has been considered as the believability of the product information provided by certain brand (Erdem et al., 2006) and the information presented in online reviews about products/brands (Senecal and Nantel, 2004). We anticipated that if fashion consumers perceive the reviews and the information in the fashion websites about fashion brands as credible and reliable, their search and purchase activities on the fashion websites will become more effective, thus performance expectancy could increase. When fashion customers do not doubt the credibility of comments posted there, they will be more likely to follow such information and be more active (have more confidence) in performing the online activities they had originally planned.

### 2.1. Drivers of performance expectancy

Website elements, web atmospherics and even intrinsic cues are known to influence online behavior and satisfaction (e.g., Eroglu et al., 2003; Dailey, 2004; Dennis et al., 2009; Dickinger and Stangl, 2013; Loureiro, 2015). Website quality has been the object of substantial empirical research in the field of online marketing, where several different dimensions emerged (e.g., Aladwani, 2006; Chou et al., 2015; Loureiro, 2015). Kim and Stoel (2004) propose one of the first attempts to measure apparel website quality by considering five dimensions: web appearance (visual quality, intuitive and easy navigation of a website), entertainment (comprises of emotional appeal and innovativeness of the website), informational fit-to-task (provide adequate information), transaction capability (how well the website supports its business function), response time (how quickly the website loads). They find that informational content, transaction capability and response time tend to be more important to satisfy fashion consumers than entertainment or even web visual appearance. Aladwani (2006) proposes a model whereby perceived website quality is the result of four sub-dimensions, which are: technical quality (ease of use, security, well-organized links, page load speed, interactivity and ease of access) general content, specific content (content clarity, freshness, completeness, usefulness and company information, product details, customer support) and appearance (visual design and layout).

Other studies of online clothing retailing point out website design, easy of navigation, website content, visual design and personalization as having a positive influence on fashion consumers' satisfaction and loyalty (e.g., Ha and Stoel, 2012; Chou et al., 2015; Pandey and Chawla, 2016). These dimensions also emerge as important to loyal consumers (e.g., Chang and Chen, 2009; Yang et al., 2005; Filieri and McLeay, 2014).

In a tourism context we may also look at different dimensionalities to measure website quality. Examples include, functionality and usability (e.g., Law and Bai, 2008), aesthetic formality and aesthetic appeal (Wang et al., 2010), information quality, system quality, service quality (e.g., Wen, 2012), website design characteristics and information quality (e.g., Tang et al., 2012). Loureiro (2015) considers four dimensions for website quality of island destinations: design-visual appeal, information, content, ease of use and interactive features.

In summary, past studies tend to consider website quality as a multidimensional construct, but there is no consensus in terms of the number of components, or rather, we see differing numbers of website quality components and different names applied to them. Therefore, there is no standard method of evaluating websites and no standard website features or attributes are used to evaluate them. Law et al. (2010, p. 310) claim that "researchers do, and should do, choose the most appropriate approach for their research objectives, target markets and stakeholders".

Here, we follow the definition by Aladwani and Palvia (2002) regarding perceived website quality, explained as the users' evaluations of a website's features that meet their needs and reflect the overall excellence of the website. In the current study, we use three components

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