

Does Experience Matter? Understanding the Changes of Consumers' Evaluation After Using an Online Apparel Mass Customization System

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Background and Purpose: An Online Apparel Mass Customization (OAMC) system enables consumers to co-design the best-fit garments online by personalizing certain desired features (e.g., color, pattern, and material). With OAMC, customers get apparel products configured to their exact wants and desires. Meanwhile, using a brand's OAMC requires consumers to actively interact with the buying process (Lee & Chang, 2011), creating more touchpoint experiences between the customer and the brand. Yet mass customization, especially in the fashion industry has not taken off; even though consumers perceive benefits from and intend to use OAMC to purchase customized fashion clothing products, their favorable perceptions may not lead to real behavioral actions.

Scholars have argued that there is a gap between behavioral intentions and real behavior. However, extant research on OAMC mainly either measures consumers' perceived expectations of OAMC (Lee & Chang, 2011) or just focuses on consumers' evaluations of OAMC after offering an OAMC experience (e.g., Merle et al., 2010, Liang & Liu, 2019). There is a lack of knowledge about the degree to which pre-experience evaluations are consistent with post-experience evaluations. To our best knowledge, extant literature is deficient in examining the role of real experiences in changing individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and post-experience behavior. To this end, *the purpose of this study* attempts to fill the gap through an experiment focusing on comparing consumers' evaluations before and after using an OAMC system.

Conceptual Framework: A research model and hypotheses were developed based on a review of literature on technology acceptance (i.e., usefulness and ease of use), with some additional factors, which include enjoyment (Lee & Chang, 2011), risks (Cho & Fiorito, 2009), and choice variety (Blecker & Abdelkafi, 2006). Two hypotheses were proposed: H1: Consumers who have favorable perceptions of an OAMC will consistently hold favorable evaluations of the OAMC in terms of a) usefulness, b) enjoyment, c) ease of use, d) choice variety, and less concerns on e) risk after an OAMC experience. H2: Consumers who have less favorable perceptions of OAMC will have an improved evaluation of the OAMC in terms of a) usefulness, b) enjoyment, c) ease of use, d) choice variety, and e) lower risk concern after receiving OAMC experience.

Method: An empirical study was conducted in a marketing research lab with student participants recruited from a major university in the United States. An online self-administered questionnaire was distributed for participants to 1) provide their perceptions of usefulness, enjoyment, ease of use, choice variety, and risk regarding an OAMC; 2) customize a T-shirt on Zazzle.com; and then 3) provide their evaluations of usefulness, enjoyment, ease of use, choice

variety, and risks based on their experience of customizing the T-shirt. Measures to assess research constructs were adapted from established research using 7-point scales. A total of 200 usable responses were included for data analysis. Around 50.5% of respondents were female, 95% of them were between the ages of 18-24, and 83.5% of them were Caucasian. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability, K-Means cluster analysis, and paired-samples T test.

Results: Cronbach's alpha for each scale ranged from .86 to .94. All variables were used in K-Means cluster analysis to identify groups. Two clusters emerged with Group A having a higher means for all variables than Group B. Then paired-samples T tests were conducted for two groups separately. Five pairs of variables were selected to compare consumers' evaluations of usefulness, enjoyment, ease of use, choice variety, and risk before and after the online customization experiment. The results showed that Group A has significantly decreased means in enjoyment, ease of use, choice variety, and risk (Table 1). Group B has a significantly increased mean in enjoyment, while has a significantly decreased mean in the ease of use and risk (Table 2). Consistently, there is no significant change in the evaluation of usefulness across the two groups.

Table 1 Paired Difference for Group A ($n_1=107$)

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	p
Pair 1	Usefulness	0.13084	5.40804	0.52281	0.25	106	0.803
Pair 2	Enjoyment	2.00935	9.81959	0.9493	2.117	106	0.037
Pair 3	Ease of Use	6.71963	10.20247	0.98631	6.813	106	0
Pair 4	Choice variety	2.50467	5.01577	0.48489	5.165	106	0
Pair 5	Risk	14.41121	14.0484	1.35811	10.611	106	0

Table 2 Paired Difference for Group B ($n_2 = 93$)

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	p
Pair 1	Usefulness	-0.55914	4.97485	0.51587	-1.084	92	0.281
Pair 2	Enjoyment	-3.8172	8.82677	0.91529	-4.17	92	0
Pair 3	Ease of Use	3.76344	10.75356	1.11509	3.375	92	0.001
Pair 4	Choice variety	-0.01075	5.10859	0.52974	-0.02	92	0.984
Pair 5	Risk	7.8172	11.06595	1.14749	6.812	92	0

Discussion/implications: Proposed hypotheses H1 and H2 were partially supported; research findings suggested that consumers who had better impressions toward an OAMC turned out to have a significantly lower rate of enjoyment, ease of use, and choice variety evaluation. Also, the experience of OAMC didn't significantly influence consumers' evaluations of usefulness for participants in this group. Consumers who had a lower expectation beforehand expressed a significantly higher evaluation on enjoyment, but a significantly lower evaluation on ease of use. Moreover, the experience of OAMC didn't significantly influence consumers' evaluation of usefulness and choice variety for participants of this group. In addition, for both groups, their rate for risk decreased significantly, indicating that real customization experiences may alleviate individuals' concerns about risk. In this experiment, customizing T-shirts was simple and easy with minimal fit issues. Furthermore, participants were given limited time to

explore the functions on Zazzle.com and most of them never visited the website before, Many participants felt that the website was not easy to use, and some who had higher expectations before using the system felt disappointed.

Overall, research findings indicated that offering an OAMC experience could change consumers' evaluation toward the OAMC. Therefore, in order for retailers to improve their OAMC offering system, they might 1) continue working on the website design to make it fun and user-friendly; 2) keep adding OAMC features like providing styles that are more basic, with more color combinations, customization suggestions, etc. for perspective consumers. From a theoretical perspective, this preliminary study showed the role that real experiences may play in shaping consumer technology acceptance.

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