



The Excitement of the Surprise: Motivations of the Subscription Shoppers

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Significance and Purpose The subscription service business has seen an unprecedented accelerated growth and consumer buzz in the apparel industry. This business model, supported by technology and digital business, offers consumers a new shopping experience by timed deliveries of “boxes” of product selections. These boxes are personally curated by stylists or algorithms based on consumer preferences and feedback. Following the upsurge of competition, companies are adopting new platforms to replace the brick and mortar retailing concept by offering consumers unparalleled convenience (Arnolds & Reynolds, 2003). With the advancement of technology, innovative online shopping features have offered shopping experiences that exceed those of traditional brick-and-mortar stores (Li, Browne & Wetherbe, 2006). As the digital disruptions highlight new consumer demands and needs for shopping, the marketplace begs for research that brings into perspective how new business models that leverage technology such as subscription services satisfy the shopping motivations of consumers. Although previous studies offer partial evidence of linear relationships between consumer characteristics and subscription shopping behavior (e.g., Woo & Ramkumar, 2017), no study offers a comprehensive critical review of online subscription services for the fashion shopper. Using qualitative data, this study examines the shopping motivations of consumers enrolled with online apparel subscription companies. This study seeks an in-depth understanding of the social phenomena of fashion subscription services based on the direct experiences of consumers.

Conceptual Framework and Methods Arnolds and Reynolds’ (2003) six-dimensional model of hedonic shopping motivations (adventure, gratification, role, value, social, and idea) served as the conceptual framework for the study. Studies addressing the utilitarian aspects of shopping like convenience, variety, and value also served to guide the study (Rohm & Swaminathan, 2004; Wagner, 2007; Kahn, Weingarten, & Townsend, 2013). Given the limited research on this topic, a qualitative inquiry into consumer motivations for using subscription services was conducted with the goal of offering insight into contributors of future growth. Data was collected via in-depth semi-structured interview method. Moreover, an in-depth interview method helped the researcher to take into context the subscribers’ profile, the characteristics of the subscribers in terms of their shopping behavior and their patterns of shopping. A holistic account of active consumers was used to extract the various motivations that led the consumers to enroll with subscription services. Fourteen participants (active subscribers) were recruited from subscription company or related Facebook pages (n=13) and word-of-mouth (n=1). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions, probes to encourage clarification and elaboration, and demographic and shopping preference questions. Interviews were audiotaped. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the NVIVO software. Following the principles of grounded theory, researchers developed a code structure in stages, using systematic, inductive procedures to generate themes based on the experiences shared by study participants (Bradley,

Curry, & Devers, 2007). A constant comparative method was used to expand and refine codes. An inter-rater reliability of 98.4% was achieved between the researchers based on the final coding guide. Majority of participants were female (n=13), 45 years (mean), received advance degrees (Masters), mostly professionals and resided across 11 states. Participants preferred a wide range of brands (e.g., Macy's, Kohl's, Loft, Old Navy, JC Penney, Michael Kors, Amazon, Cabi, Brooks Brothers, and thrift stores) apart from receiving subscription boxes. Annual budget for fashion-related items ranged from \$200 to \$9600. Participants subscribed to various subscription services that offer clothing, accessories, beauty or grooming products (Stitch Fix, Trunk Club, Le Tote, MM. LaFleur, Wantable, Zoe Report, ThredUp, Dia & Co., Sprezzabox, Rocksbox, and Birchbox). Although the subscription period ranged from 1 month to 4 years, the experiences shared by participants were quite vivid irrespective of duration of subscription.

Results and Discussion The benefits received from the subscriptions showed convenience and actual value to be related to utilitarian shopping motivations. Hedonic shopping motivations, as noted in the literature (e.g., adventure, gratification, social, perceived value, and idea), were related to consumers' subscription service experience. Actual value shopping refers to the price savings from deals and discounts and perceived value shopping refers to the perceived product value given the entirety of the shopping (Lee & Overby, 2004).

Experiential shopping motivations related to adventure and self-gratification were prominent themes found among subscription shoppers. Participants noted the "excitement or the anticipation of receiving a box", the thrill of "looking forward to the box", and the surprise element associated with the arrival of each box as well as the "fun" that is experienced by the subscribers while opening the box. In addition, several participants described the subscription box as a "surprise gift" or similar to "receiving a Christmas present". As such, the element of surprise and treating oneself appeared to be appreciated by the subscribers. Beyond relating to the utilitarian and hedonic shopping motivations, participants shared interesting experiences that defined the subscription shopping experience and highlight its uniqueness.

The study found style experimentation and wardrobe compatibility were two emerging motives to enroll in subscription services. For apparel subscription services with personal stylists, most participants emphasized the key role of a stylist/curator in delivering the value proposition of online subscription retail. The shopper's own personal characteristics (e.g., open to new styles, actively giving feedback, posting "looks" on Instagram) also influenced their satisfaction with the subscription services. The productive/harmonious interaction between the stylist and the shopper was important. The study found that a "good match" between the stylist and consumer was key as well. Although most of the subscribers profiled themselves as conservative shoppers, at times they were flexible and experimental with their style. This helps the stylists to curate a box with items that the subscribers could use as well as experiment with to get the experience which otherwise they would not be able to derive if shopping by themselves.

Based on the findings, an inductive model was developed to explain the motivational constructs of apparel retail subscription and the facilitating role of the stylist/curator as the influencer. The stylist/curator and box delivery structure add value to the subscription experience and transforms the consumers' subscription shopping experience.

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