Fashion Shopping with Voice-Activated Assistants: A Phronetic Iterative Approach

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Rationale:

The continuous rise of IoT (Internet of Things), a network between internet-connected physical devices, is transforming retail and consumer shopping behavior. Voice-activated assistants (VAAs) are IoT devices that serve consumers to shop products/services using a combined operation of mobile and smart home devices and voice commands and are gaining in popularity among consumers as a way to shop in contactless and conversational voice commerce environments. Likewise, fashion retailers also identify VAAs as the growth potential for business with an estimate of $40 billion in US voice commerce by 2022 (Shukairy, n.d.). In 2020, about 128 million US consumers used a voice assistant monthly, up by 11.1% from 2019 (Petrock, 2020). Unsurprisingly, consumers' use of VAAs for shopping recently begun to diversify that 30% of US internet users used a VAA for information searching and purchasing of goods and services while 85% occasionally ended up buying products recommended by VAAs over the brands they had in mind. Moreover, consumers shop various product categories through VAAs that everyday household items (25.11%), entertainment (21.15%), and apparel (21.15%) were among the top categories (Shukairy, n.d.). Therefore, VAAs and voice commerce are penetrating consumers' shopping experiences, adding another channel for retailers to connect with consumers in everyday life.

Despite the excitement found in popular press, academic research on the consumer experience with VAAs for apparel shopping is scarce. To date, major research focuses involve (1) investigating specific aspects of VAAs (e.g., privacy risk, human-likeness) and their impact on consumer responses (Vimalkumar et al., 2021; Whang & Im, 2021) and (2) identifying a comprehensive list of determinants of consumer trust toward, adoption of, and engagement with VAAs (McLean et al., 2021; Moriuchi, 2019; Pitardi & Marriott, 2020). Along with ongoing innovation, exploratory research delineating a broad picture of consumers' perceptions of VAAs for shopping would advance the current knowledge of the phenomenon. This study aims to enrich the understanding by addressing a research question: In what ways do customers perceive buying fashion items with voice-activated assistants? This study, thus, presents a preliminary exploration of how consumers perceive and use voice-activated assistants for shopping of fashion goods and services by identifying key themes specific to consumer shopping with VAAs.

Methods:

A phronetic iterative approach was adopted as a way to allow emergent qualitative data to provide additional deliberation for contemplating existing theories and research (Tracy, 2018). This method is an abductive, problem-based approach that researchers inquire and reflect on which emergent findings are interesting based on the data, extant literatures and research interests (Tracy, 2018). Initially, 21 voice-activated assistant users were recruited by Qualtrics and interviewed by our research team during the months of July-December 2020. Participants were predominately Caucasian (68.2%) and male (54.6%) with a mean age of 43 years old and

annual household income of $120,000-$139,000. Each interview was recorded and transcribed from Zoom with the average discussion lasting 31 minutes. Descriptive and In Vivo Coding were used in the first round of analysis followed by second cycle coding with axial coding; the second cycle coding is used to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from the first cycle codes (Saldaña, 2016). Finally, our research team engaged in online group discussion, dialogical intersubjectivity, coder adjudication, and finally, group consensuses to reach an agreement (Saldaña, 2016).

Interpretation:

Informed by the phronetic iterative framework, we identified five themes: (1) retail category comfort, (2) fashion brand loyalty, (3) impulse buying, (4) trustworthiness of the ecosystem, and (5) visual confirmation. The first theme is defined as consumers' comfort with buying specific retail categories such as home goods and food. Several participants (75%) used IoT to re-order products they already had experience with but often did not feel comfortable shopping for new fashion products without visual confirmation. The next theme centered around brands that consumers (75%) were loyal to such as Converse or Lane Bryant. Brand loyalty superseded the usage of VAAs when ordering on platforms like Amazon. Third, consumers (38%) utilize re-ordering and list features, often mentioning that they do not just impulse buy but are more strategic with their shopping carts. The fourth theme focuses on the trustworthiness of the VAAs' ecosystem through the seamless integration between platforms and ease of working with the companies (e.g., Amazon or Google) during the pre- and post- transaction (75%). The last theme highlights the importance of using a visual tool for the extra benefit of receiving confirmation of the product when a customer ventures into a new retail category (63%).

Discussion and Implications:

This study makes academic and practical contributions by shedding light on how consumers perceive and use VAAs for fashion shopping. Ultimately, the overarching essence of the data is that consumers feel confident about VAA-mediated shopping that the VAA's company (Amazon/Google) provides especially when they are familiar with products and brands to shop. However, because customers cannot visually confirm with their voice assistant (i.e., Alexa with Echo Show), they often do not want to purchase fashion items on an impulse; informed and rational decision making is likely accomplished with VAAs. The benefit of having visuals falls in line with fashion products' hedonic nature that exploratory browsing behavior is fairly common among apparel shoppers (Park & Kim, 2021). Moreover, customers feel comfortable re-ordering items they already have previous knowledge of such as designer cologne or buying staples/specific categories for the home. This highlights an opportunity to develop partnerships for fashion brands and IoT companies to allow voice assistance to order items on their platforms. Despite that Amazon and Google offer devices with screens (e.g., Alexa with Echo Show), not all users have them and rely on their previous brand loyalties when ordering fashion items. Therefore, making more fashion brands available on Amazon or integrating Alexa technology into third-party websites like Nordstrom's could increase sales from consumers using voice activated assistants.

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