Experience and preference of online-offline shopping of fashion product: Insights from Gen Z consumers of a developing country

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Introduction and Literature Review: During the month of June 2020, an impressive 22 billion people visited an e-commerce retail store at least once (Schulze, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic forced people to stay home and look for ways to find everything they need in a digital marketplace (Su et al., 2022), so they do not have to go outside. When people were able to venture out again, the numbers stabilized; however, it is anticipated that online shopping will constitute 24% of global sales by 2026 (Statista, 2023). On the contrary, physical stores enhance customer value by providing the physical engagement that is needed to purchase a fashion product (Zhang et al., 2022). Both online and offline shopping have their respective pros and cons (Dabija & Lung, 2019); however, to comprehend the perspective of a Gen Z fashion consumer (Copeland et al., 2023; Thangavel et al., 2022) in a developing country, more qualitative research is imperative. In the existing literature, studies focusing on the experience and preferences of Bangladeshi Gen Z consumers are very limited (Su et al., 2023). The research questions like "What are the issues that Gen Z fashion shoppers are concerned about in both online and offline shopping in Bangladesh?" or "What are the factors that influence them to prefer online shopping to offline and vice-versa?" are not addressed in the existing literature. This study aims to understand the Gen Z consumers' experience and preference of online-offline shopping for fashion products in the context of Bangladesh. There are some studies that focused on Bangladeshi consumers' online shopping. The study of Ummul et al. (2016) identified the factors that are creating major barriers for customers shifting to online shopping in Bangladesh. Rahman et al. (2018) employed a quantitative approach to study consumer purchasing habits in terms of internet shopping. Suhan (2015) studied the acceptance level of online shopping among the internet users of Bangladesh. The study of Hossain et al. (2022) examined the association of online shopping behavior with the demographic characteristics of Bangladeshi consumers. Salam et al. (2022) used a quantitative approach to investigate consumers' shopping behavior after getting vaccinated and resuming offline shopping during the covid-19 outbreak. Existing literature lacks an in-depth understanding of the Gen Z consumers' experience and preference of online-offline shopping for fashion products in Bangladesh and thus this study fills the gap.

Methodology: To achieve the goal of the research, a qualitative approach was adopted, specifically in-depth interviews with a purposive sample. A snowball sampling strategy was used to enroll Gen Z consumers in Bangladesh. A total of 13 interviews were conducted and the sample size was established based on the data saturation (Hodges, 2011). Interviews were conducted in person, over the phone (through online meeting tools Zoom, WhatsApp, etc.). Among the respondents, 11 were male, 2 were female, and the age range was 22 to 26. The participants were asked questions like "Do you prefer online shopping over offline? Why?", "What would you say are the major differences between your online and offline shopping experience?", and "How would you evaluate the refund policy in the Bangladeshi fashion market in the context of both online and offline?". After interviewing, all the interviews were transcribed, and all the research team members analyzed the texts collectively. Each team member

worked together to analyze the data, develop codes, identify themes, and write up the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results And Discussion: After carefully going through the data and analyzing the text, several distinct themes have been identified. These themes are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Theme#1: Rise of Online Consumer Groups. There has been rise of online consumer groups in Bangladesh. Social media platforms have made it easier for consumers to come across and build online consumer groups. Through these groups, consumers share information about the best products in the market and help each other purchase the right product at the right price from the right shop. These groups have 3 major aspects:

Dealing with the Discrepancy Practices: As many online stores do not provide the exact product they show, consumers get cheated often in Bangladesh. Consumer groups help them navigate through these online stores and go to the right place to purchase their desired product. As a consumer said, "When I check out a new online store, I post in a girls' group and inquire about them. If I get positive comments from real buyers and from group admins, then I get the confidence to buy from them. That girl group is amazing because you get answers about almost every store" (P12).

Increasing the Reliability of Products/Stores: There are so many products available in the market and a consumer cannot always have experience using all of them. Experienced shoppers share their experiences regarding products constantly in those consumer groups, so it gets easier for consumers to rely on a certain product or store. As one participant said, "When a product has brilliant reviews, I can rely on it without using it" (P14).

Information Gathering Platform: These online groups are a great source of information for many Gen Z consumers. When a consumer thinks of buying a product about which she/he does not know much, online groups help a lot in these cases. One participant admitted that "When I need a product to buy, for which I don't know a good market, I try to buy it online. Suppose, I need perfume, but I don't know where I can find a good one. So, I look for it online and check people's reviews from different consumer groups." (P6)

Theme#2: Unfriendly Return Policy. It is evident from the data that none of the participants is happy with the return policy of the Bangladeshi fashion brands. The experience of the consumers is similar for both offline and online brands. Most retailers in Bangladesh do not provide a refund policy (no money back); instead, they provide a product exchange system where a customer can substitute a product for another if they are unsatisfied with any purchase within a specified duration. One participant said, "There's no proper money refund policy. You can get product replacement at best. But what if I don't like any other products apart from the one I bought? I think if I can give it back intact, I should receive a full money refund" (P13).

Theme#3: Factor of Preference- Trend, Price, Engagement, and Bargaining Opportunity. The majority of Gen Z consumers in Bangladesh generally opt for online stores to buy products that have a lower price point and engagement (e.g., T-shirts, sports jerseys) and choose offline to buy products that have a higher price and higher engagement (expensive panjabi, formal shirts). The data demonstrates that these consumers feel insecure about buying expensive and more engaging products online. They feel that online shops bring trendy and fast fashion products earlier than offline shops. One participant said, "For trendy stylish products, I prefer online shopping. I'll buy t-shirts, cardigans, and other trendy unique products from online. Online are years ahead considering trends. But for a panjabi or a shirt, I will go to a physical store. I will check and see if it fits me, if it is worth the price" (P3). The data of this study also demonstrated that bargaining opportunity is very crucial to Bangladeshi Gen Z consumers. Consumers are

not pleased with the fact that online stores do not provide them with the opportunity to bargain. One participant stated, "You can't bargain while shopping online" (P10). Another participant said, "I can buy offline products more reliably, and there's the chance of bargaining, which lets me negotiate the price I think is reasonable" (P6).

Implication: This study contributes to the literature on analyzing the shopping behavior of Gen Z consumers of a developing country in an era where almost everything is getting online. The findings of this study might help industry policymakers in designing a more consumer-friendly return policy. Future researchers may focus on cross-cultural studies comparing Gen Z consumers' shopping experiences between developed and developing countries.

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