

Styling for All: Strategies for Effective Fashion Styling in Cross Generational Online Sales

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Background and Purpose

E-commerce and online reselling are transforming fashion retail. Online reselling provides convenience, accessibility, and a wide range of options to sellers, motivating them to shift from in-person selling to online consignment platforms. People can now easily trade fashion globally from home. This open market enables entrepreneurship with fewer limits allowing sellers to show products through digital photographs to reach more customers and increase profits (PowerReviews, 2022). With new platforms constantly widening the e-commerce industry, there is an increasing popularity in online consignment stores (e.g., Etsy, eBay, Depop). These platforms cater to distinct demographics by offering specialized products (Barthold & Gardete, 2022). For instance, Depop focuses on vintage fashion for younger generations, while Grailed appeals to men seeking designer fashion products. In online selling, textual descriptions and the quality of product images are critical determinants in influencing e-shoppers purchasing decisions (Pereira et al., 2022; Di et al., 2024). However, there is a deficit in studies addressing the role of quality product images in successful online sales. Considering a large portion of inventory images are taken by users possessing little to no photography skills, older sellers have found it challenging to style products in a way attractive to young buyers (Moran, 2021; Soo, 2020). Likewise, younger sellers have difficulties styling products that are attractive to older generations. This research aims to 1) collect and compare current styling images among online consignment stores and 2) generate a styling guideline to provide online sellers with insight into the impact of their product images through various key selling dimensions, such as lighting, product display, use of models, lifestyle shots, backgrounds, model poses, and angles. This study will provide sellers with selling strategies that will allow them to tailor their products to attract a diverse consumer base, ultimately leading to increased sales and the development of valuable entrepreneurial skills in a competitive online market.

Method

This study was conducted at a major university in the United States in 2024. Three undergraduate team researchers were trained to collect, examine, and analyze examples of styling photos on nine online consignment websites and apps over three weeks for 15 hours. Researchers engaged in **1.) image collection**. In total, 700 images were collected from these nine platforms, Etsy (15), eBay (70), Depop, Poshmark, ThredUp, Grailed, Mercari, Vestiaire Collective, and Facebook Marketplace (100 each). Researchers then conducted **2.) styling guideline evaluations**. Evaluation of online consignment store blog posts providing photo styling advice and academic journals were undertaken to collect wise and poor apparel styling tips for online selling and construct a styling guideline. Qualitative content analysis was utilized to examine the styling attributes in product images on online platforms (Flick, 2014). For example, researchers utilized an article published by Depop as a guideline for photo styling advice. Researchers then accessed Depop and took screenshots of images that adhered to or

deviated from the recommendations provided in the article. The researchers aimed to identify the common mistakes or successes made by users when photographing their items on the platform. The same procedure was used for all platforms to analyze current product images, specifically looking at their use of lighting, product display, models, model poses, backgrounds, angles, and individual and lifestyle shots.

Findings

The collected images were analyzed (wise styling = 349, poor styling = 351), and the research team finalized a styling rubric (Table 1). For example, styling should allow a buyer to judge the size of a product. An uncentered subject does not allow potential buyers to see the entirety of a product to determine its quality or size. When styling without models, it is essential to ensure that the clothing is laid flat to ensure the product is fully shown and easy to see, especially for small items, such as bracelets or necklaces. Results show that the lack of models makes it challenging to assess small products (e.g., jewelry, shoes, accessories) size, function, and features without models to assist in visual size comparison.

Table 1. Comparison of Wise and Poor Styling

	Wise Styling	Poor Styling
Lighting	Good Lighting: bright natural lighting, professional lights, or a brightly lit space to showcase items' characteristics properly (e.g., color, texture, size).	Bad lighting: low, harsh, or unflattering lighting that distorts items appearance, resulting in inaccurate perceptions of items' characteristics (e.g., color, texture, size).
Background	Blurred/Muted Background: blank backgrounds or an empty and single-tone colored wall that ensures focus on the item.	Excessive Background: cluttered, messy backgrounds which divert attention from the item and reduce their visual appeal.
Image	Centered Image: item is centered in the middle of the frame to capture its dimensions, creating a balanced and visually appealing composition. Clear Image: focus is only on the stationary item, highlighting its details and textures in different angles and positions.	Uncentered Image: item is unbalanced and not visually appealing, in angles and positions that do not capture its entire dimensions. Excessive Image: item is not stationary when photographed, distracting elements in the background or surrounding the main item.
Surface	Flat Surface: plain, neutral flat surface allowing the items to stand out and avoid distractions.	Uneven surface: messy, colorful, textured surfaces that make distracting backgrounds.
Clothing Quality	Clean: clean and stain-free, steamed or ironed, use of a lint roller to remove lint or pet hair, and with no tears or damages.	Unclean Clothes: stained or wrinkled, with visible damage, pet hair, lint, human hair, or fuzz visible on the item.

Discussion/implications

This study provides insight for sellers to tailor their product images to increase consumer engagement and online sales. The results of this study 1) suggest sellers should carefully consider the way they photograph their products, and 2) help sellers optimize their sales, increase user engagement, and develop entrepreneurial skills. Sellers should review marketplace photography advice articles to learn about the effective use of props, models, lighting, and other

beneficial tools when engaging in e-commerce. Appropriately positioned and posed models may elevate a product image if all previous factors are considered. A great example would be placing hands on hips or with hands behind the back if showing a T-shirt or facing forward with hands above the waist for pants; this way, clothing items are accentuated and displayed on a 3D figure. This study also contributes to the research in product styling in secondhand clothing platforms by providing a foundation for a styling rubric that future researchers can reference and build upon in advanced research studies. This study is also a new application to use qualitative content analysis in fashion research which can contribute to the literature of future studies.

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