

# **Disrupting the fashion retail journey: Social media and GenZ's fashion consumption**

## **Abstract**

### Purpose

The aim of this paper is to assess the use of social media by Gen Z consumers and the ways they impact on and re-shape their fashion consumption journey. This generational approach uses the lens of uses and gratifications theory (UGT) to explore the customer fashion retail journey from the perspective of the Gen Z consumer.

### Design/methodology/approach

The research uses an exploratory approach in response to the relative lack of research in to GenZ consumers combined with a need to understand shopping journeys. Mixed methods were used with a first phase of interviews followed by a survey of 102 Gen Z students recruited online in the UK during the Covid19 pandemic.

### Findings

The study found that GenZ users of social media for shopping sought gratification from experiences derived from social relationships, entertainment and information. The need for immediate gratification was found in new information and meeting new people to maintain social relationships, learn about products and inform the shopping journey. Further, the research supported the importance of visual images in the affective gratification of shopping needs. Resale sites on social media were favoured for their low prices, information about previously owned fashion items and the opportunity to exercise sustainable fashion choices.

### Originality/value

The research advances understanding of fashion shopping journeys through social media and online resale sites. It demonstrates that younger consumers, GenZ, shop through the gratification of experiences informed by their social networks and wider contacts. The linear stages of pre to post-purchase shopping are merged and looped as they exchange information about their shopping journey, from information gathering to post-purchase comments. The role of the brand to these knowledgeable consumers conducting their own resale trade, is to facilitate access to and information about their products,

Keywords GenZ, social media, shopping journeys, experience, gratifications.

Paper type Research paper

## **Introduction**

Recent studies have demonstrated the rapid advances in digital retail, networked technology and social media and their negotiated influence on shopping behaviour, largely from a retailer and brand management perspective (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Souiden *et al.*, 2019; Appel *et al.*, 2020; Hoyer *et al.*, 2020; Roggeveen *et al.*, 2020). This has led to calls for further research into shopping journeys as consumer-led experiences when interacting with brands, enabled by the blending of social and technology tools, which provide new online shopping opportunities (Grewal *et al.*, 2020).

One group of consumers that has grown up under the influence of digital technologies and social media for a range of functional and emotional purposes in everyday life, is Generation Z (GenZ). For Gen Z, born between 1997-2012, such technologies and media have contributed to a shift in their shopping experience from largely store-based to networked experiences (Pantano and Gandini, 2018). Further, these young consumers increasingly use online resale sites as a form of collaborative consumption in co-producing consumption experiences (Botsman and Rogers, 2010) by monetising their skills and unused resources through peer-to-peer exchange of owned goods. The aim of this paper is to assess the retail use of online resale and social media by Gen Z consumers and ways in which the experience of these digital spaces impact on and re-shape fashion consumption journeys (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010). This generational approach uses the lens of uses and gratifications theory (UGT) (Katz and Gurevitch, 1973) to explore the online needs of the consumer and the gratifications gained when using resale and social media from the perspective of the Gen Z online consumer. The enhanced use of digital media by this group of consumers is contextualised by the disruptive influence of Covid-19 on physical retail stores, which resulted in a series of enforced closures during 2020-21 and an increase in online retail activity.

## **Literature Review**

Retailers and consumers use both digital and offline channels for fashion sales and purchasing as part of the experiential retail journey, through which they are empowered to select and individualise pathways to achieve their objectives driven by cognitive, affective and behavioural considerations. The adoption of social media has contributed to this complexity by facilitating engagement with influencers, friends and virtual employees, and in the fashion industry, in particular, image uploading, editing and sharing as consumers shopping online are more inclined to read reviews, seek posts by influencers, engage with friends, virtual employees, or a chatbot (Grewal *et al.*, 2020). In addition, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting accelerated dependency on online retail may have contributed to long-term cognitive, affective and behavioural shifts in consumers that can impact buying patterns, psychographic behaviours and other marketing activities (Zwanka and Buff, 2021).

Social media can be defined from a number of perspectives, as platforms, channels and social environments, or more holistically as an ecosystem of a 'diverse and complex set of behaviours, interactions, and exchanges involving various kinds of interconnected actors' (Appel *et al.*,

2020, p.80). From a consumer perspective, these socially networked, mediated sites can enhance and contribute to heightened shopping experiences, hedonism and an expectation of hybrid online and in-person offerings among users that are manifested in information sharing, social interaction and real-time access to news and infotainment content (Pantano and Gandini (2018; Zwanka and Buff, 2021). For businesses, social media sites facilitate e-commerce and more specifically create a context for social commerce, where social and commercial activities are combined (Esmaeili and Hashemi, 2019). Consequently, the digital environment has become integral to the functioning of everyday life (Dunas and Vartanov, 2020), a process heightened by physical restrictions during Covid-19 lockdowns (Statista, 2021), in which the interconnectivity of the digital ecosystem demonstrated a heightened influence on consumers' experience of both selling and purchasing (Intel, 2021).

## **GenZ**

One important group of 'tech-native' consumers, is GenZ (Dimock 2019; Fry and Parker 2018; Priporas *et al.*, 2017). Their consumption characteristics are fundamentally defined by the presence of digital technology (Smith 2019) for a range of functional purposes and social gratifications including shopping (Priporas *et al.*, 2017; Howe and Strauss, 2009). Heightened social media consumption forms a living environment for this generation, possessing the qualities and characteristics not merely of the mediated channel itself, but also of the social space, denoting different types of interactions with different platforms (Dunas and Vartanov, 2020). GenZ's presence is increasingly evident as prosumers in emerging forms of exchange and consumption, specifically in the peer to peer (P2P), collaborative, sharing economy (Kotler, 1986; Patel 2017; Kim 2019; Choi and He, 2019) and in how they value non-ownership and possession of previously used objects (Hamari *et al.*, 2016).

However, there is relatively little academic research that focuses specifically on GenZ's use of digital skills and brand knowledge for consumption practices, although industry reports provide insights into their importance for retailing (Patel, 2017; Fromm, 2018; McKinsey, 2020). Gen Z consumers demonstrate their propensity to buy, sell and re-sell at will and largely on their own terms through online exchange sites (Hoffower, 2021). In this sense they are both consumers and digital prosumers operating in and driving collaborative consumption communities (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). In fashion consumption, these sites enable consumers to create and curate their own "divided wardrobe" comprising a mix of items sourced from resale or rented vendors. Moreover, the combination of information gathering and commercial activity but also social connection and pleasure seeking from online exchange sites and social media highlights the importance of experiences for this consumer. Experience is conceptualized as consumption generating hedonic and utilitarian value that exists as a multidimensional construct in a commercial context involving the customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical responses to a retailer (Verhoef *et al.*, 2016). Affective aspects are found infused throughout a shopping experience through product search and identification (Iglesias *et al.*, 2011), engagement and/or purchase and consumption (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Hoyer *et al.*, 2020; Shavitt and Barnes, 2020). Consequently, prosumer experiences from these stages can be interlinked, so that past experiences impact current and

future experiences, whereby the experiences of today become the past experiences for tomorrow (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020), a process where consumers may seemingly jump from the pre-purchase to post-purchase stage. However, this shopping process is less well understood in the context of younger consumers and their motivation and usage of online exchanges and social media in the shopping journey.

## **Theoretical framework**

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) originated in studies of mass media behaviour, intent on understanding consumer motivations and the related gratifications they achieved from mass mediated consumption processes (Katz and Gurevitch 1973; Katz et. al, 1974). Use of media is selective and motivated by an awareness of personal and functional needs that are a combination of psychological, sociological and environmental conditions (Bae, 2018), while gratifications refer to expectations about the content formed in advance of using the medium. According to UGT, people tend to be motivated to use any mass medium by how much they rely on it (Galloway and Meek, 1981), and how well it satisfies their needs (Boudkouss and Djelassi, 2020; Lichtenstein and Rosenfeld, 1983), or fulfils unsatisfied needs by using particular media (Raschnaubel, 2018). Needs themselves are categorised by Katz and Gurevitch (1973) in five groupings, cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and escape. Gratifications obtained refer to the satisfaction obtained from using something (Palmgreen *et al.*, 1980) and the difference between gratifications sought and those obtained can demonstrate the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction experienced by individual users (Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1979; Palmgreen *et al.*, 1980; Quan-Haase and Young, 2010).

UGT has been employed in many digital media and communication technology studies (Hui-Yi and Ling-Yin, 2018; Whiting and Williams, 2013), including mobile device adoption (Joo and Sang, 2013), social media usage and social commerce (Jones and Kang, 2020). Different types of Social Media demonstrate distinctive user gratification needs and new gratifications to explain in part, how individuals use different types of social media (Ruggiero, 2002; Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). Previous studies using UGT have posited that frequent users of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat derive different gratifications from their use, including passing time, showing affection, following fashion, sharing problems, demonstrating sociability and improving social knowledge (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). They also demonstrate different impacts on brand community related outcomes: identification, engagement, commitment, and membership intention (Phua *et al.*, 2017).

Shopping motivations are both utilitarian, relating to price and function and hedonic, which includes adventure, role, value, socialisation, and idea shopping (Childers et al., 2001; Kim, 2006). Gratifications from online shopping domains are related to social media and live-streamed commerce, where social presence and enjoyment are associated with the symbolic value and hedonic value of consumers' social shopping experiences (Athwal *et al.*, 2019; Cai and Wohn, 2019; Joines *et al.*, 2003; Wongkitrungrueng *et al.* 2020a). More specifically, social commerce is positively influenced by accessing information quality, cool new trends, and perceived enjoyment (Sharma and Crossler 2014).

Studies have shown that a holistic experience is expected by the customer regardless of how and where it is accessed in the customer journey (Colombi *et al.*, 2018; Foroudi *et al.*, 2018; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Prentice *et al.*, 2019). Co-engagement experience can connect with and be analysed by applying UGT, but there is little in previous research about the gratification of needs for co-creation and co-engagement in online retail settings. Two research questions arise from this review of the literature. First, how socially evolving social media (SM) behaviours among GenZ on resale fashion sites contribute to different retail and consumer interactions, recognising the saliency of influence, collaboration and ownership from a consumer and prosumer perspective? Secondly, what motivating uses (cognitive information seeking and purchasing) and gratifications (emotive, aesthetic, social and entertaining) are embedded in GenZ's collaborative selling and consumption or prosumption experiences?

## **Methodology**

The research was undertaken as an exploratory project using a mixed methods approach. The choice of an exploratory design is explained by the relative lack of earlier research in the field of GenZ consumption, but it also responded to the need to develop new knowledge about emerging generational shopping journeys. Two stages of data collection were undertaken to ensure the quality of the results. The first stage was conducting short interviews to obtain foundational insights. Second, surveys were undertaken following the first stage of data collection and a UGT theoretical foundation was employed in the development of the questionnaire.

Short interview was the first method used to obtain initial insights on how the key demographic interact and engage with technological devices and social media. Although there are studies that have covered on similar topics, those focusing on GenZ and social media remain limited. It is therefore crucial to achieve an initial understanding of consumer feelings and perceptions about the needs and wants from social media online shopping journeys (Hammersley, 2011). The short interviews were undertaken using unstructured questions derived from consumer behavioural literature and recommended for qualitative research (Creswell, 2001). Six participants who fitted the key demographic profile were recruited. All short interviews that lasted around 45 minutes, were conducted online due to Covid restrictions. Given the objective of the first stage, the interviews, as audio data were coded directly without transcribing them. This analyses process has been employed by various ethnographic studies aimed at obtaining "quick" initial data (Pink 2013; Bryman 2013). The codes were then categorised into three main themes covering social media usage motivation, being up to date and information-entertainment needs.

The second stage of the data collection was undertaken using an agile survey. The insights from the first stage interviews were subsequently used as the basis for constructing the questionnaire. There were parts in the questionnaire covering social media usage, needs gratifications, resale market platform, and social media & shopping journey. The question types used were multiple choice and 5-point likert scale, with a total of twenty-seven questions.

Built on googleforms, the questionnaires were distributed through online platforms including email and social media. The questionnaire was designed with seven categories of gratifications: social interaction; information seeking; to pass time; entertainment; relaxation; communicatory utility; and convenience utility (Whiting and Whiting, 2013). In each category, items were framed around the consumption practices and gratifications expected from shopping with social media. Responses were received from 102 Postgraduate level students, recruited through an online survey conducted in Autumn 2021; from these 60% of respondents were female, 30% male with the remaining percentage unrecorded. The analysis, in alignment with a mixed research methods approach, was undertaken using univariate statistics to summarise the findings

The analysis, in alignment with a mixed research methods approach, was undertaken using univariate statistics to summarise the results. The findings in the next section, are presented as themes that combine both stages of the research.

## **Findings**

In GenZ's shopping journey, social media is considered to be a key part of their everyday lives. Instagram is the most used platform (99% of respondents), followed by Facebook (33%) and YouTube (32%). However, these platforms can serve different functions and the motivations to use them and gratifications arising from them varies by platform. Interview respondents were able to differentiate their preferences for different social media usages and the ability to use sites for a combination of purposes. While Instagram was the most popular platform for information gathering, all have multiple uses that often combine information seeking, chat and entertainment. This diversity contributed to the emergence of a temporal dimension, evident in a need for immediate gratification, as one respondent explained: "YouTube and TikTok are there to 'keep me busy' and to stop the timelessness of boredom setting in". Immediacy was an appealing feature of Snapchat while scrolling on Twitter was criticised as "mindless"; on the other hand, the Depop resale site could be overwhelmingly time-consuming to navigate. But temporality was also evident in the users' changing perceptions over time of different media and their usefulness. Facebook was used for keeping in touch with family, posting events and was seen to be more popular with 'older people' as it lacked the immediacy of engagement and multimodal aspects of still and moving images.

Both survey and interview respondents highlighted the importance of images over text and the ability to access and post aesthetically pleasing, and in some cases inspiring pictures that access new, upcoming or sustainable designers or an individual's own fashion and accessory collection or styled "look" (Table 1). As a respondent explained, with Instagram "...it's not like you have to like scroll to really interact much with stories. You can just like just keep swiping through and within seconds you've got quite a lot of information". The gratification gained from accessing interesting people on social media platforms should be understood as a search for difference or distinctiveness to provide moments of diversion, 'the equivalent of sharing a joke with a friend' and a fun activity. While fashion brands create powerful identities to frame and control their image, individual sellers have absorbed their visual strategies in the

process of reselling and purchasing goods. GenZ’s brand knowledge (Smith, 2019; Samala and Singh, 2019) and expertise in content curation, is evident in their awareness of the need to show merchandise for sale “in the best way”, and to manipulate their settings for the right image.

<b>Affective gratifications from images</b>	<b>Count</b>
Aesthetically pleasing pictures	48
Stories in videos	40
Interesting people	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>

Table 1

The second most highly ranked affective gratification linked to images, involved ‘stories in videos’, which unfold in different ways. The circulation of social media amplifies the spread of information through the addition of personalised likes, comments and chat. These processes merge news with storytelling and the diversity of video stories creates a complex, interactive communications nexus that is central to GenZ’s social media usage. Further, this imagery combined with music, the drama of fashion shows and influencer endorsements make a significant contribution to the holistic experience of the fashion shopping journey. Some interview respondents also gained gratification from liking, collating and saving images of fashion items and accessories across platforms from Instagram to Pinterest which one respondent noted was an economic and sustainable way of ‘owning’ an item without having to buy it.

It was clear that GenZ’s experience of social media contributed to the gratification of keeping up to date and accessing the latest news. In the context of social interaction, respondents explained these qualities as connectivity not only with friends and family but also with designers and brands. User gratification is defined by the ability to meet and see new people and is related to the search for immediacy and novelty, to keep abreast of the latest developments in their areas of interest, as well as building social networks synchronously. Notably, being ‘first to know’ was important to maintain status and credibility in social groups. As with socially mediated stories, this gratification merges the boundaries of information and entertainment by relating the individual’s interests and their choice of people to look at or follow as sources of influence and in addition providing a means of communicating and being popular, with an increasing network of friends.

<b>Affective gratification of social interaction</b>	<b>Count</b>
Be the first to know about latest news	46
Meet/see new people	32
Be popular/being recognised	15
Keep up to date	3
Other	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>99</b>

Table 2

When addressing the uses of information, respondents described the gratification of acquiring new knowledge about the latest fashions and looks that reflect their specific interests (Table 3); in this way a respondent may ‘...like to keep up to date with brands that I follow, like the small sustainable brands’. The networked sociality of some sites is an attraction not only offering desired items but insider information as knowledge and social capital; for example “...some resale sites such as US Poshmark have groups that you can join or you can like it or meet other people from different parts of the world and they have like brand ambassador programs.” However, ‘news’ has become a relative term, spanning factual, evidence-based information sources and personalised accounts and stories. The latest news can refer to pre-purchasing, to purchases themselves where contacts post images of the purchasing process, for example, different looks or products and post-purchase comments and endorsements.

<b>Affective gratification from information acquired from social media</b>	<b>Count</b>
Stay up to date	46
Obtain new knowledge	40
Review products	13
All of these	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>

Table 3

In response to questions about the use of social media for shopping, the most significant gratification was ‘to be inspired’ about fashion (Table 4). The search for inspiration appears to be central to the circulation of messages on social media sites such as Instagram and the consumption of images provides a significant source of information and importantly, ideas for the construction of individual identities. While image is important, scrolling down and reading reviews about a product from other people and comparing products were also important sources of knowledge for these consumers, constituting ‘go to’ touchpoints on their retail journey.

<b>Affective gratification from the use of social media in shopping</b>	<b>Count</b>
I can be inspired	40
I can read reviews about a product from people	35
I can compare products	22
All of them	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 4

The interviews and survey demonstrated the importance of the utilitarian gratification of finding low priced items on online sale and resale platforms, typically discussed in terms of finding a branded or designer bargain. From the survey of users’ motivation to use resale platforms, the mean average responses demonstrated that they were seen as cheaper to buy from (3.56); that they inform consumers about preloved products (3.46) and they are channels through which to purchase sustainable fashion items (3.45). Resale sites accommodate GenZ’s interests both in low price but also sustainable fashion, enabling them to browse and to be ‘able to contact the sellers to ask more about clothing’.



There are several dimensions to price-point driven resale that distinguish it from e-commerce and socially mediated commercial activities; first that GenZ buyers know that products are generally not new, but are traded as previously owned, even if only marginally used, and that the price is set by the market rather than a brand's price list. Second, products sold in this way tend to be part of an individual's curated collection and the quality of the collection, the image of, and trust in, the seller contribute to the price that the product will command. However, the interview findings demonstrated how difficult it was to sell, rather than buy on resale sites and that further know-how was required to make this a viable proposition. Third, products can be hard to find elsewhere and have a unique or exclusive element to them that adds value. This degree of exclusivity creates a further need to be informed about preloved products. While physical stores selling vintage clothing have developed as a retail sector, this product category is well suited to online selling and is supported by recommendations from other shoppers on social media sites through the 'heart' function. Preloved is also recognised as a route to sustainable use of fashion resources and thereby can gratify an individual's need to contribute towards sustainability and the environment expressed through their shopping habits.

When it comes to purchasing from resale platforms, the survey demonstrated that social media enables GenZ consumers to know more about the brand, its history and activities (mean average response 4.22); to know more about the product, in terms of its origin and production processes (4.14) and to help their decision making (4.08). As respondent A explained, "knowledge of brands is important for judging their quality, you know they are good quality so a second-hand purchase is likely to be good". The motivation to buy through these platforms is almost entirely about price and quality, so there is considerable gratification to be derived from finding items that are "really cheap and sustainable" or a unique designer piece. In this visually mediated world, where exclusivity of curated items is important it is necessary to identify the 'real' thing from a copy, and the findings demonstrated that trusted opinions are valued; the quality of this information helps overall decision-making by the consumer. There is an affective, but also a personal integrative, value-driven element in seeking or finding bargains with the aim of creating a capsule wardrobe, and specifically the ability to create an outfit that looks new and unique from second-hand pieces.

In addition, knowledge about manufacturing and use of resources satisfies Gen Z consumers' sustainability objectives and ethical values:

'...social media has shown me so much more about the sustainability aspect of buying second-hand clothes and .....(its importance) which I would never have known if I was still walking around with my mum in a shopping centre'

By not buying new clothes the consumer is extending the life of existing ones and satisfying their need to purchase in a sustainable manner, in a shopping journey that is distinctively different to one based on physical store retailing.

## **Discussion**

The research demonstrated the uses and gratifications underlying consumer behaviour and consumer interactions on social media and online exchange sites. Time spent by consumers in combining socialisation, information gathering and entertainment helps to distinguish their shopping journeys from the linear 'stages' of pre-purchasing, purchasing and post-purchasing associated with an era of consumer behaviour founded on mass markets (Drewal et. al, 2019) and brick-and-mortar contexts. The consumption of socially mediated experiences can lead to the compaction of the shopping journey, as the purchasing stages come closer together and demonstrate the holistic nature of socially mediated experiences in which social contacts can embody 'information'.

However, the focus on GenZ consumers uncovered less well-known motivations and gratifications about their consumption practices. There was an evident need to be engaged, to be in the moment rather than being passive and unoccupied. For a consumer not to be doing anything means they have little to post on a platform and with that lack of visibility they begin to disappear from their chosen friendship and other social groups. For socially engaged GenZ consumers, invisibility strikes at the core of their online existence: new and interesting people, personal and commercial information, news and entertaining images have to be circulated and contribute to the generational shopping experience. In relation to the uses and gratifications theory, the quantitative findings showed that 'to be socially connected' and 'up to date' were more highly ranked than the other needs gratifications. It might be expected that isolation during the Covid-19 lockdowns would contribute to this need; however, the effect was not evident from the interview data. Rather, GenZ consumers position social media as the primary source of useful information, and use new knowledge to connect with others in selling or buying items on resale sites.

The second question concerned the process of cognitive information seeking and fulfilling aesthetic and entertainment gratification forming part of the retail experience. The research showed the significance of affective gratification from aesthetically appealing images and the stories that unfold in, for example, Instagram videos but also their potential for information gathering. Bossen and Kottasz (2020) found gratification of affect as the primary driver of adolescent behaviour on TikTok, in which their need for entertainment and fun are categorised as passive behaviours. However, this research showed that in a shopping journey, GenZ consumers can quickly move from passivity to participation and contribution. Looking at fashion videos and images provides entertainment, but also information and inspiration to find designer or exclusive items in the creation of personal looks at desirable price points. They contribute to the consumer's need for status and credibility but are also creative acts of curation. The hunt for a cheap bargain and the creation of a personal collection of preloved, sustainable items requires a creative and productive capacity. Moreover, as the 'looks' can also be shared with friends and family they have a participatory function as well. The research further demonstrated consumers' interest in brands to support their own curating and trading activities and that knowledge about brand's quality and authenticity contributes to perceptions of a product's value.

## **Theoretical implications**

This research supports Grewal and Roggevein's (2020) call to examine factors in the customer journey and the "looping aspects and jumps between different stages" (p.7) to reflect the non-linear process of the selling and shopping act. Previous research in social commerce research has demonstrated the role of social communities in pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase communications. This research demonstrates how the experience of a shopping journey is mediated by individual and social interaction, so that post-purchase reviews and images from one consumer can loop back into the pre-purchase, information gathering activities of other consumers.

Among GenZ, the use of selling platforms such as *Depop* provide an alternative commercial space to both demonstrate consumers' personal curating interests, for example, their ability to curate their wardrobe, primarily as a buyer and create interesting personalised collections but also their commercial acumen in pricing, promoting and selling their merchandise, in some cases items that they had upcycled or repurposed. Storytelling and manipulating images to create an appropriate commercial effect, further contributes to the distancing of the brand's control over the purchasing stages. For peer-to-peer commerce, it is important that an effect is recognised, liked and is communicable in the social media marketplace and GenZ consumers have to be particularly adept in interpreting images and text to make a purchase. This creates a tension for consumers to navigate between image, truth and authenticity.

The research addresses the conceptual development of UGT and the gratifications that motivate social media use. Drawing on Katz et al. (1973) these are generally tested in deductive research in cognitive, tension-release, affective, social integrative and personal integrative categories (Claffey and Brady, 2017; Rauschnabel, 2018). However, this research found a considerable area of overlap among GenZ users, of gratifications arising from maintaining relationships, finding new people and seeking information. In responding to questions about information use, participants demonstrated an interest in exchanging the latest news, viewing and comments as information acquiring activities. They may also gather information about products in the same way, both through a social network and through formal reviews and branded sources. One limitation of the research is that as an exploratory project it did not seek to examine the relationship between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained. Previous research has shown that if gratifications obtained from use of a medium exceed those sought, it will lead to greater satisfaction and repeated use (Bae 2018). There was some evidence for users finding it too difficult to sell their items through resale platforms and that the technical and operational problems of personal selling deserve further investigation.

## **Managerial implications**

The research findings demonstrate how younger consumers in GenZ are using social media to create alternative shopping journeys. These consumers combine their experiences with those of their friendship and interest groups to collaborate in resale sites. Brand knowledge is important to them because branded products must project a clear identity to be curated and

contribute to the owner's collection. The marketers' role is to take responsibility for brand guardianship to ensure the consistency of communications through multiple touchpoints and media and to create a user-friendly platform that enables buyers and sellers' straightforward access (Park et al, 2017). A second role is to facilitate consumer use of platforms and websites, so that consumers can access the latest information, news and images about the product to incorporate into their commercial activities. A deliberately implemented customer experience plan will create a broader impactful engagement with the brand that may last longer in the consumers' minds and therefore may lead brand attachment and brand loyalty (Jussila and Jalonen, 2017). In fashion marketing, omnichannel communications and distribution have become well established with many branded touchpoints provided by the brand or shared by the brand with the consumer. But the GenZ shopping journey stands outside conventional, linear journeys and managers need to respond to the constant flow of messages and images that relate to their brands but that are not within their control. As stories circulate through social media, the danger is that the brand owner's communications become distorted or lost.

## **Conclusion**

The impact of Covid 19 during 2020 and 2021 was felt by all ages of the population and sectors of society. At this time, physical retailing and leisure sites were particularly badly affected, while e-commerce generally prospered. However, GenZ's use of social media provides insights into alternative shopping journeys. E-commerce has existed for several decades, while social commerce, defined by commercial activities and transactions on social media and networks, is in an emergent phase (Esmaeili and Hashemi, 2019). As GenZ's shopping journeys are conducted across social media and resale platforms, they inevitably share some of their characteristics with brand-controlled social commerce. Nevertheless, there are distinctive points of difference. The most significant is the degree of control by the users and relative marginalisation of the brand and its commercial objectives. The second is the experiential nature of shopping that extends across use of visually appealing images, video and multiple and diverse social exchanges. As social commerce research recognises, online communities play a significant role in pre, purchase and post purchase activities. However, social commerce, producer-consumer interactivity is generally recognised to be in the hands of the businesses and research tends to focus on the benefits to the business. By contrast GenZ seeks gratifications from social interactivity and information gathering from different sources that may include stories, images and entertainment. These experiential elements, sometimes separately but at other times intertwined enable consumers to realise their own ambitions and objectives. In the post-Covid world, where uncertainties remain about physical stores and e-commerce's intrusion into personal privacy, GenZ's shopping journeys assure a high level of agency for the consumer as collaborative producer.

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