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Barriers to Responsible Consumption in e-Commerce: Evidence from Fashion Shoppers

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Abstract This qualitative study investigates the barriers to responsible consumption in e-commerce from the online shoppers' viewpoint. The purpose of the study is to increase our understanding of what prevents young adults from making responsible purchases in online stores in the context of fashion retail. The data were collected by interviewing ten Finnish fashion shoppers aged 23-27 years. The findings show that responsible consumption is perceived as complex and challenging. The study identified barriers related to online stores and consumers themselves. Online store implementation (product availability, information and transparency, and pricing) is vital in facilitating online shoppers' responsible purchasing decisions. However, consumers' personal consumption patterns and habits, and problems related to time use and responsibility assessment, can also be constraints on responsible consumption. Future studies are encouraged to investigate how online solutions, such as user interfaces, online tools, and apps, could better assist consumers in overcoming the identified barriers.

1   Introduction

The popularity of online shopping has grown tremendously with the spread of information and communications technologies (ICTs). The popularity of e-commerce is explained by its ease, availability, and breadth of selection. However, while e-commerce provides multiple benefits for today's consumers, from an ecological perspective it has also contributed to negative changes in consumption habits and purchasing behavior (Abukhader & Jonson 2004). The efficiency and affordability of online shopping have led to more shopping being done without real need. Many online stores offer consumers free shipping and returns, as well as an extended payment period, which has resulted in products being easily ordered and inappropriate products being returned. Other environmental challenges posed by e-commerce relate to individual deliveries and small one-off purchases as well as packaging materials. Simultaneously, the state of the planet and overconsumption have become significant issues, and consumers are becoming more environmentally conscious (Demarque et al. 2015). The negative repercussions of e-commerce have become important topics of discussion in business and academia.

This qualitative study investigates the barriers to responsible consumption in e-commerce from the online shoppers' viewpoint. The study aims to increase our understanding of what prevents young adults (aged 23-27) from making responsible purchases in online stores in the context of fashion retail. Previous research has suggested that there is no significant difference in terms of consumers' purchasing decision process between online and brick-and-mortar stores (Katawetawaraks & Wang 2011). In addition, most studies approach responsible consumption at a general level without shopping channel (online/offline) specification. Despite a bulk of papers investigating responsible consumption from different perspectives, a specific understanding of online environments is missing. Therefore, as the importance of online shopping grows continuously, there is a need for studies that focus on responsible consumption in online channels. Furthermore, previous research has shown that consumers' attitudes towards responsibility and their behavior can be contradictory: responsibility is valued, but consumers do not necessarily behave responsibly (Belk, Devinney & Eckhardt 2005; Carrington, Neville & Whitwell 2014). Investigations on the barriers to responsible consumption help to better understand why this is the case. The findings of this study are also

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useful in designing online store user interfaces that support consumers' responsible purchasing behavior.

This paper discusses the previous studies on responsible consumption in the e-commerce context in Section 2 below. Section 3 discusses the data collection and analysis, and Section 4 presents the findings of the empirical study. Section 5 discusses the contributions and managerial implications of this study and gives some suggestions for future research.

2   Theoretical background: responsible consumption and e-commerce

Responsible and sustainable consumption have become common research topics in the 21st century. The concepts are intrinsically linked, as sustainability can be seen as an objective pursued through responsible action. The study fields have become deeply blurred and similar issues are discussed within both fields (Bansal & Song 2017). The core idea of responsible consumption is to reduce the impact of goods or services on the environment by various eco-friendly activities. In line with Ulusoy (2016), this study defines responsible consumption as consumption that has a less negative impact on the environment than consumption that does not take into account the foundations of sustainable development.

Extant studies on responsible consumption do not usually distinguish between different service channels; hence responsible consumption in e-commerce channels has not received special attention. However, factors affecting responsible consumption and other responsible behavior have been widely explored. These studies have highlighted situational factors. According to Stern et al. (1995), favorable situational factors increase and encourage green consumption. One can assume that the situational factors affecting responsible purchase behavior, in particular, can be very different in online and offline environments. In addition, the impact of demographic and psychographic factors on consumer responsibility have been addressed. Straughan and Roberts (1999) highlight the psychographic factors: environmental awareness, opinions, and attitudes influence responsible purchasing intentions. According to previous research, factors that encourage responsible consumption include, for instance; knowledge (Young et al. 2010; Joshi & Rahman 2016), a positive attitude towards responsibility (Straughan & Roberts 1999; Demarque et al. 2015; Kumar, Manrai & Manrai 2017), marketing and campaigns,

and brand image (Joshi & Rahman 2016). Consumer sentiment, especially environmental concerns, has a positive and direct impact on responsible goals and behavior (Straughan & Roberts 1999). Identified barriers to responsible consumption include, for instance, high prices (Peattie 2010; Joshi & Rahman 2016), lack of information (Demarque et al. 2015), and awareness (Luthra, Govindan & Mangla 2017), poor product availability and quality (Joshi & Rahman 2016), and lack of policy support (Blok et al. 2015).

The fashion industry is often emphasized in the debate on responsibility because its enormous environmental challenges are increasingly being recognized. The fashion industry has been associated with significant negative social and ecological impacts, such as employee exploitation, excessive use of renewable materials, and waste generation (Wang et al. 2019). In addition, fashion retail is also an important segment of e-commerce: its share of online shopping is significant. For example, in 2017, 50% of Finnish consumers bought clothes and accessories online, and the number is expected to grow every year (Paytrail 2018). Online shopping for clothing and shoes in particular is a burden on the environment due to high return rates (Chen & Chai 2010; Demarque et al. 2015). For these reasons, the empirical part of this study focuses on fashion retail: the online shopping for clothing, accessories, and footwear.

3   Data collection and analysis

As the purpose of this study was to identify and better understand the barriers to responsible consumption from the consumer viewpoint, a qualitative research approach was chosen. Young adults aged 23 to 27 were selected as the target group for the study because they are characterized by traits associated with the Generation Z. Those born around the mid-1990s were born into the digital world with internet and electronics. They are typically experienced online shoppers and are often aware of responsibility-related themes. Dabija et al. (2019) note that applying green strategies and sustainable principles in business activities is vital when trying to appeal to the Generation Z consumers.

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The data collection was carried out with semi-structured interviews in 2020. The number of interviewees was determined on the basis of the saturation of the material obtained from the interviews: interviews were conducted until they no longer produced new information relevant to the study. Ten people, four males and six females (referred to as participants 1-10: P1-P10) were interviewed (for details, see Appendix 1). The interviews were conducted via the Google Meet video call service with an average duration of 39 minutes. The participants were asked to describe their e-commerce shopping and responsible consumption behaviors regarding fashion wear. The discussed themes included, for instance: how participants define responsibility in consumption, how responsibility guides them as consumers and influences their purchase behavior in online stores, and what are the problems or benefits of online shopping in terms of responsible consumption. The exact form or order of the questions was not defined in advance, which provided an opportunity for additional questions and discussion. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The data was processed by inductive coding (Thomas 2003). The findings emerged from the analysis of the transcribed data. All the mentioned barriers to responsible consumption were first collected from the material, after which they were classified into groups according to their content. Finally, as the result of several classification rounds, the identified barriers were formed into two main groups, including online store characteristics, and personal characteristics and resources. The findings are discussed more closely in the next section.

4   Findings

The findings show that responsible consumption is often perceived as complex and challenging. It is hampered both by the information and products offered by online stores and by consumers' own personal characteristics and resources. The data analysis revealed three barriers related to the online stores (poor availability, lack of information and transparency, and high prices) and three personal barriers (poor knowledge and challenges in responsibility assessment, existing consumption habits, and lack of time) to responsible consumption in e-commerce. These often intertwined barriers are discussed here below.

4.1   Online store characteristics

Poor availability was one of the main factors influencing the participants' responsible purchasing decisions. According to the interviewees, the supply of responsible products is still weak, and some manufacturers do not offer responsible products at all. It was concluded that when a need for a particular product type arises, there are only a few responsibly produced options available. If one desires a specific brand, there might not be any responsible alternatives.

> "Supply. Because if you want something specific, there may not be responsible alternatives." – Male, 23 (P4)

However, online stores were seen as a better option in terms of supply than brick-and-mortar stores. The online product range is more extensive. Particularly specialty stores (that only sell products that are produced responsibly) make it easier to browse products from different manufacturers. Many ecofriendly brands have also focused their sales online, making products unavailable offline. With the growth and spread of e-commerce, the selection and availability of responsible brands have increased significantly.

Lack of information and transparency. The interviewees were aware of the environmental burden caused by consumption. Better awareness had led them to consider more of their purchases, and many admitted that they had begun to pay more attention to the backgrounds of products with increased awareness. However, obtaining information was not considered easy. The lack of information and transparency of company operations was repeated in the interviewees' reports.

> "I hope it would not be left to the online store user—that we have to play a detective and look for information. Backgrounds should be very openly presented in the online store." – Female, 25 (P9)

Although production transparency has been increased, and companies' sustainability efforts and goals have been communicated more openly, it was unclear to the participants how the companies' operations (e.g., production) have actually changed: whether companies are behaving more responsibly than in the past. In particular,

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the different eco-certificates and the increased openness of fast fashion chains made the participants suspicious.

> "I don't think it has changed very much from the past, although transparency and awareness are now much increased and promoted. Those are just trendy words." – Female, 25 (P9)

Instead of certificates and superficial information, interviewees looked for concrete examples and explanations.

> "I think those certifications might be a bit out there at the moment. If the production methods and chains are clearly explained, it is much better than a single certificate." – Male, 27 (P6)

> "I'd be interested to know more about it than just that 'this charge will offset the carbon footprint'. It would be nice to know exactly what you pay extra for and whether it truly makes a big difference." – Female, 25 (P2)

However, information retrieval and comparison were found to be easier and more trustworthy in online than offline environments. In the online environment, information about product backgrounds and producers' practices can also be obtained from different external sources.

High prices. The importance of price was apparent for the participants' willingness to make a responsible purchasing decision—many considered high price to be a considerable barrier to responsible or more responsible consumption.

> "Many times, if there is a product in which all the material and workmanship is Finnish, then the price is often so much higher that it may not be possible to buy such a product." – Female, 26 (P5)

The interviewees emphasized the importance of brand image and value-for-money when considering the price. The products of responsible brands were perceived to be more expensive yet of better quality than fast-fashion chains' responsible options. Purchasing responsible fast fashion at a cheaper price did not seem sensible in the long run.

4.2   Personal characteristics and resources

Poor knowledge and challenges in responsibility assessment were identified as important obstacles to responsible consumption. When consumers are unaware of the effect of their purchases, they also do not feel guilty about their irresponsible purchasing decisions.

> "I think it's just that people don't necessarily know or think about these issues that much." – Female, 26 (P5)

The assessment of the environmental impact was considered a challenging task. Whereas looking for information about products and companies and their background can be difficult, the fact that a consumer must also evaluate the information and assess its reliability adds to the burden.

Existing consumption habits. The individual's current consumption habits were also identified as a barrier to responsible consumption. The phenomenon of responsible shopping was considered rather new and many of the interviewees had only recently woken up to consider their consumption habits.

> Responsibility is a whole new thing. Probably many are used to shopping, and not thinking about the effects at all. I haven't always thought about it as I do now." – Female, 26 (P10)

Moreover, responsibility and the disadvantages caused by consumption are not always the main things in mind when shopping. The interviewees admitted that their hedonism restricts responsible purchasing decisions. While responsibility is considered important, it can be easily forgotten in a purchase situation.

> "When I don't need or want anything, I start to think that 'yes, we should have more solidarity with each other and reduce consumption'. But as soon as you need something, such ideas disappear. Your greed and desire for pleasure are obstacles." – Female, 25 (P9)

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When compared to brick-and-mortar stores, online stores were seen as a more irresponsible shopping channel. This was explained by people's consumption habits in online shopping environments.

> "I find it [e-commerce] less environmentally friendly. Just because of the way people behave in online shopping: they order a lot and then return." – Female, 23 (P1)

The interviewees concluded that it is easier to make impulsive and unplanned purchases in an e-commerce environment because online stores create various incentives for the consumer (e.g., free shipping) to increase the total amount of purchases. Many of the interviewees concluded that they tend to buy less at once in brick-and-mortar stores. Moreover, the responsibility of consumption in general became an essential theme in the interviews, as some of the interviewees considered consumption irresponsible regardless of the channel.

> "It's complicated. If you want to be truly responsible, then you don't buy anything; that's the most responsible activity of all." – Male, 27 (P6)

However, completely stopping or significantly reducing consumption was perceived as challenging, as it would require making significant changes in one's everyday life.

Lack of time. Finally, urgency and lack of time were considered noteworthy barriers to responsible consumption, which was seen as time-consuming. While it was deemed important, the participants explained that they might not behave in a responsible manner because they do not have the time to look for information about products, or to look for a responsible alternative for a certain product. Aspirations to responsibility are not always reflected in actions, as the following quote shows.

> "I do think about these [ecological] issues. But actions may be different, you don't always behave as you would like to." – Female, 23 (P1)

It was pointed out that it may take a lot of time to clarify the background of the products, even if there is some information provided in the online store. In the context of online shopping, the customer also needs to consider the total time taken by the process, including the time required for the order to arrive.

"Getting acquainted takes a lot of time, and then time just runs out. You go:
'I can't do this anymore'." – Male, 27 (P6)

Online shopping was generally perceived as easy and effortless. Responsible
consumption in online channels, on the other hand, was perceived to be complex,
as it often requires awareness and the willingness to search for information.

5 Discussion: conclusions and suggestions for future research

This study investigated the barriers to responsible consumption in e-commerce from
young adults' viewpoint in the context of fashion retail. The findings show that while
the online store implementation (including product availability, pricing, and
information related to responsibility) is essential in facilitating responsible
purchasing decisions, consumers' personal consumption patterns and habits, as well
as everyday challenges, also play a vital role in responsible consumption. While
responsibility is considered necessary, responsible purchase decisions are often
considered to require time and effort. Incorporating responsibility into existing
consumption habits can be challenging, and it is easy to ignore and forget, especially
in urgent purchase decisions.

Overall, the findings of this study are in line with previous studies not focused on e-
commerce. They demonstrate that responsible consumption is of interest to many,
but there is a gap between ideals and responsible actions (Belk, Devinney &
Eckhardt 2005; Carrington, Neville & Whitwell 2014). Responsibility is easily
avoided due to its complications related to the pricing and product availability (Chen
& Chai, 2010). The findings suggest that pricing of responsible products can be a
challenging task from an online store's perspective. Even though high prices are
considered purchase barriers, overly low prices, in contrast, can be perceived as
suspicious, signaling that everything is not truly done responsibly in the production
chain. Many of the identified barriers are linked to information, knowledge, and
understanding related to responsibility (e.g., Young et al. 2010; Demarque et al. 2015;
Joshi & Rahman 2016). Although responsibility-related information has increased in
online stores, background information regarding products and company operations
is still considered limited. Furthermore, shops and manufacturers communicate their
responsibility measures in very different ways, making the responsibility assessment

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difficult. Comparing the different options, including companies, their eco-labels and eco-actions, and products, is a challenge for consumers.

The findings suggest that consumers need common standards and more concrete and easy-to-understand measures and indicators to support their responsible purchasing decisions in online environments. In general, solutions that make responsible shopping more straightforward and less time-consuming are needed. There is a need for studies and solutions that consider how product backgrounds, material choices, and manufacturing information, for instance, can be better informed and communicated to consumers. Future studies should investigate how user interfaces, online tools, and apps could help consumers in their responsibility assessments. Studies on other contexts and different consumer groups are also welcomed in order to better understand whether similar barriers exist within different retail categories or consumer groups, for example younger and older consumers.

Finally, although this study identified barriers to responsible consumption with e-commerce, similar problems exist with brick-and-mortar stores. Hence, when considering the obstacles, online stores can have many competitive advantages over offline stores. Even though the availability of products and responsibility-related information were characterized as deficient in online stores, online stores typically offer more options for responsible consumption. In addition, information retrieval and product comparisons are often easier online. Hence, as the importance of responsible consumption and online shopping will grow continuously in the future, this should create opportunities for new online businesses that are either fully specialized in selling responsible products or acknowledge the foundations of sustainable development in their services. It also provides excellent opportunities for online solutions and systems that educate and assist both consumers and businesses in their pursuit of responsible consumption in all kinds of services.

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Appendix 1: List of participants

	Age	Sex	Position	Interview length (min)
P1	23	Female	Student & part-time employee	42
P2	25	Female	Student	37
P3	25	Male	Student & full-time employee	45
P4	23	Male	Student	34
P5	26	Female	Student & full-time employee	37
P6	27	Male	Student & full-time employee	42
P7	25	Male	Student & part-time employee	38
P8	25	Female	Student & part-time employee	35
P9	25	Female	Full-time employee	40
P10	26	Female	Student & full-time employee	37