COMMUNICATING NON-DIGITAL ATTRIBUTES THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA ON APPAREL E-COMMERCE WEBSITES

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1. Context

This paper is part of a Ph.D. study that is the extension of Bozzi´s (2018) master´s research. The author found that one of the main issues consumers faced when buying clothes online is a lack of trust in the information presented on websites. As part of her study, she carried out usability tests to understand the process of buying clothes online. During the usability tests, it was possible to observe that users faced some difficulties throughout the process, some were verbalized even before they interacted with the system, affecting the users´ expectations and influencing their experience.

It was verified that there is a barrier between the physical and digital environments due to the lack of direct contact with the product, preventing the user from making a complete inspection. Uncertainty regarding size and fit contributes to the existence of this barrier. Despite some initiatives from the industry and standardization organizations, such as the Brazilian Association of Technical Standards [ABNT] (1995; 2002; 2004; 2009), in Brazil, and ISO (1991), retailers do not follow a single reference to build their size tables. The different size tables adopted by the companies make it difficult for online users to make decisions because they are not sure which size to buy and if the products will have a good fit.

The usability tests revealed the users face the following problems (BOZZI, 2018), they:

- Do not trust the information presented on e-commerce websites;
- Some do not buy clothes online because they are not sure about the fit and size;
- Do not trust the product measurement information or do not understand them;
- Do not know technical terms - they lack the knowledge to understand fabric information and have trouble identifying different apparel categories (E.g.: the difference between blouse and shirt);
- Absorb information differently across devices (desktop/laptop or smartphone);
- Have the perception that there is not enough information to support their decision-making;
- Are influenced positively or negatively by the photographs;
- Most use information from previous purchases to support the decision-making;
- Find it difficult to understand non-digital attributes.

In summary, e-commerce apparel website users do not trust online product information, especially attributes that refer to the size and fit. The fit is considered a non-digital attribute as it is difficult to describe it through a screen (BELL, 2016), there is a loss of information when communicated digitally (LAL; SAVARY, 1999).

The aim of this paper is to promote a preliminary discussion about the difficulties in communicating non-

digital attributes through digital media, such as the internet. E-commerce websites must ensure at least the same level of security that a consumer feels when shopping at a physical store (VITOR; NERY; MOREIRA, 2016), providing users with enough information expressed in a clear manner providing them support in their decision-making process.

2. Non-digital attributes

Non-digital attributes, like texture, can only be fully assessed through direct contact. The latter is a key characteristic to evaluate apparel and is best verified through touch. The fit of a shirt, when described online, can be quite unclear to some consumers. Therefore, depending on the sales channel, consumers may not have enough information about a product.

From the user-centered design perspective, when a product does not meet expectations, it contributes to a negative UX. The lack of information and physical interaction with a product are some of the main barriers to buying online. In Portugal, among the 8 reasons that discourage online purchases, 4 are related to insufficient and unclear information about the product or the purchase process (CORREIOS DE PORTUGAL, 2018). Detailed product descriptions are considered an important criterion by 92% of Portuguese e-shoppers (DPDGROUP, 2019). Schade (2014) recommends that descriptions answer users' questions. The author noted in her research that many users did not have enough information to make a purchase decision. Apparel requires multisensory contact, apparently, the lack of direct interaction can lead to less satisfaction and greater risk perception (BLÁZQUEZ, 2014).

In view of the limitations of some shopping channels, consumers began to demand from brands an omnichannel strategy (BELL et al., 2016), that is, one that gives them several touchpoints options, online and offline. The omnichannel strategy is a means to offer users the advantages of online and offline channels (BELL, 2016).

3. Interaction Design

Digital interfaces are gradually replacing humans. Self-service terminals in supermarkets and airports are becoming the norm. Although it is often cheaper, the onus is placed on users as they must interact with machines instead of another human. Executing a wrong command can result in frustrating experiences, and sometimes the consequences are difficult to reverse, especially for beginners (PREECE; ROGERS; SHARP, 2015).

The main objective of interaction design is to reduce these negative aspects of the user experience and to improve the positive ones. It is about developing interactive user-centered products that are easy, effective, and pleasant to use (PREECE; ROGERS; SHARP, 2015).

4. Information design as a tool to support e-commerce

Due to the development of digital media over the past years, it is necessary to reflect on how information is being presented to users. Clothes have many non-digital attributes and, therefore, elaborating their description can be a challenge for companies and difficult for consumers to understand. Also, companies do not follow a single reference to create size tables, they target specific audiences and confuse consumers as it is not clear to them what size they are buying.

To communicate clothing attributes more efficiently, we consider information design as a tool. The term begins to be considered an integrator of a series of other related fields, such as graphic design, usability, human-computer interaction, and ergonomics (BAER, 2008). This area of design is primarily the result of effectively organizing data to transform it into information and developing instruments (e.g., a map or a website page) to transfer this information to increase users´ knowledge or to guide tasks effectively (ZWAGA; BOERSEMA; HOONHOUT, 2014).

Due to a complex system of size tables, it is essential to offer consumers rich product presentations and provide ways to help to understand and to use this information (MASON et al., 2008).

5. Product presentation pages

Websites that only offer images of an item on a plain background are less attractive to consumers than photos of models (LE BON, 2015). Photos depicting real consumption situations can help the decision-making process, they enable consumers to imagine themselves using the product (YOO; KIM, 2014). Since online consumers cannot touch the product, photographs must be clear and detailed. Apparel websites should also allow buyers to enlarge and rotate images to help to determine and appreciate quality and fit. Besides, a detailed description can reduce the risk of buying from an online seller, increase engagement, and facilitate the decision-making process (LE BON, 2015).

The quality of information presented to consumers is fundamental to form a mental image of the product. In online retail, an effective presentation is not only attractive for consumers, but it also facilitates decision-making. In a digital environment, product presentation plays a key role in obtaining affective and cognitive responses, subsequently impacting shopping experiences and results. The importance of online product presentation is intensified for categories that involve a multisensory experience as part of the consumer decision-making process (KIM; LENNON, 2008; YOO; KIM, 2012).

6. *Vanity sizing*

Another source of confusion for consumers is vanity sizing. It is a common practice among apparel companies and consists of manipulating labels so that the printed size is different from the actual one. This practice aims to sell larger items as if they were smaller, giving the consumer the impression of being slimmer. Ashdown (2014) explains that as there are no mandatory size standards in several countries, the manufacturer can choose the number on the size label.

Although some studies indicate that vanity sizing leads to favorable evaluations, based on the positive mental imagery that it evokes when consumers picture themselves wearing a smaller size (AYDINOĞLU; KRISHNA, 2012), it is another factor that contributes to the problem of having different ready-to-wear clothing sizing systems across brands.

7. Tools to visualize apparel items

To mitigate issues regarding size and fit, many commercial attempts have been developed, for example, tools that allow the consumer to input their measurements to create a personalized avatar of their body. Or algorithms and databases that convert body measurements into size suggestions. However, some of these attempts do not consider personal preferences or incorrect input of information (GRIBBIN, 2014). Different studies are not unanimous as to the effectiveness of these tools (KIM; LABAT, 2013; BELL; GALLINO; MORENO, 2014).

8. Conclusion

This paper intended to promote a preliminary discussion about the difficulties to communicate certain attributes of clothes on online media, such as fit and texture. Throughout the Ph.D. research, from which this article stems, we intend to find ways to improve the exchange of information between sellers and consumers, and to contribute to investigations related to e-commerce and UX.

The different areas mentioned – interaction and information design, as well as: ergonomics, usability, and UX - form a network of knowledge and concepts that will be applied to understand how to improve apparel product presentation pages. For this research project, UX is considered as the guiding principle and the other areas of knowledge collaborating so that the final user experience is efficient, effective and satisfactory.

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