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# The impact of user-generated content in the fashion industry: A case study of *SHEIN* and *PrettyLittleThing*

## *Kullanıcı tarafından oluşturulan içeriğin moda endüstrisindeki etkisi: SHEIN ve PrettyLittleThing üzerine bir vaka çalışması*

Chloe CARR<sup>1</sup> 



### Abstract

The rise of online shopping has encouraged online retailers to discover new ways to ensure consumers have a positive experience when searching for information within the competitive landscape. User-generated content (UGC) can be conveyed in a variety of formats and contexts, such as reviews, photos, forum posts, testimonials, and much more (Fader & Winer, 2012). The purpose of this research is to investigate and compare *SHEIN*, which hosts the functionality to post UGC in the form of reviews with photos, and *PrettyLittleThing*, which does not allow the functionality for UGC in any form. Very limited literature explores UGC in the fashion clothing industry amongst the young, upcoming generations. To address this, a sample of 12 females aged 18 to 26-years-old participated in semi in-depth interviews to discover the impact of user-generated content on the information search stage of the consumer decision-making process. This research adds to the current UGC body of knowledge in the form of photos with reviews in the fashion industry via a case study context. The findings emphasize the positive influence UGC (in the form of reviews with photos) has on the information search stage of the consumer decision-making process.

**Keywords:** User-generated content, reviews with photos, consumer decision-making process, information search, online shopping

### Öz

Çevrimiçi alışverişin yükselişi, çevrimiçi markaları, tüketicilerin rekabet ortamında bilgi ararken olumlu bir deneyim yaşamalarını sağlamanın yeni yollarını keşfetmeye özendirir. Kullanıcıların yarattığı içerikler (KYİ), tüketici yorumları, forum gönderileri, kullanıcı fotoğrafları gibi farklı biçimlerde ve bağlamlarda karşımıza çıkmaktadır (Fader & Winer, 2012). Bu araştırmanın amacı, kullanıcıların yarattığı içeriklerden biri olan fotoğraflı yorum kullanımını alışveriş sayfalarında kullanan *SHEIN* ile bu hizmeti tüketicilere sunmayan *PrettyLittleThing*'i araştırmak ve

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karşılaştırmaktır. Moda giyim endüstrisinde genç ve gelecek nesiller arasında kullanıcıların yarattığı içerikler üzerine yapılan araştırmalar sınırlıdır. Bu çalışmada yaşları 18 ila 26 arasında değişen 12 kadın tüketicikle, kullanıcı tarafından yaratılan içeriğin, tüketicinin karar verme sürecindeki aşamalarından biri olan, bilgi arama üzerindeki etkisini araştırmak amacıyla derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu araştırma, moda endüstrisinde kullanıcılar tarafından geliştirilen içerik örneklerinden biri

olan fotoğraflı yorumlar literatürüne vaka çalışması ile katkıda bulunmaktadır. Bulgular, markaların sayfalarında yer alan fotoğraflı yorumların tüketici karar verme sürecinin bilgi arama aşaması üzerindeki olumlu etkisini ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kullanıcı tarafından oluşturulan içerik, fotoğraflı değerlendirmeler, tüketici karar verme süreci, bilgi arama, çevrimiçi alışveriş

## Introduction

User-generated content (UGC) is presented in many different techniques, versions, and structures, including: blog posts, reviews, photos, testimonials, and social media posts (Fader & Winer, 2012). An overarching definition of UGC is a broad medium allowing users the freedom to share reviews, preferences, and opinions in a virtual community, typically based on their own experiences and posted onto websites and social media platforms (Muller & Christandl, 2019). Furthermore, it is essential to emphasize that UGC is “brand-related content created by users” (Colicev et al., 2019). The scope of UGC definitions is wide, as UGC is a research area that is continuing to evolve (Bucko et al., 2018). Minimal literature explores UGC in the context of reviews with photos (Zinko et al., 2020). The hospitality industry paves the research as this industry has implemented UGC for a long period of time, most commonly in the format of reviews and more recently the introduction of photos to support the reviews, therefore providing the fundamental basics for this study.

The present case study research aims to examine two online fashion clothing retailers, *SHEIN* and *PrettyLittleThing*, that have many similarities in terms of the target market, price, size of product portfolio, and information search elements. However, the outstanding difference in their information sources available to consumers is that *SHEIN* provides the functionality for users to post and view UGC in the form of reviews with photos, whereas *PrettyLittleThing* does not. Furthermore, exploring other websites that are similar and comparable to *SHEIN* and *PrettyLittleThing* demonstrates this functionality is rarely available.

The consumer decision-making process is a five-stage framework that outlines the general thoughts and actions that consumers undertake when making a purchasing decision (Karunakaran, 2008). This research investigates the information search stage

of the process. The information search stage occurs when a consumer is not clear about the exact purchase they would like to make to satisfy their needs. Consumers may use a range of sources to complete this. However, the information search is usually unique to the consumer (Sherlekar et al., 2010).

## **Online shopping**

Young adults aged between 18 and 26 years-old tailor where and how they shop based on what they are purchasing due to the ease of accessibility to information (Mintel, 2019). Young-adult consumers are pertinent to target for research, as this age is when they begin to enter the economically active stage of their lives, therefore their purchasing power becomes paramount for organizations to monitor (Mintel, 2019).

Online social shopping is a form of online social interaction where customers communicate their product knowledge, thoughts, and opinions in online communities (Cheung et al., 2015). Li & Ku (2018) suggest consumers recognize the advantages of consuming information provided by those on social networks mostly irrelevant to which customer has posted it; whether it is a friend, family member, acquaintance, or stranger, the difference in influence is minor in an online social community. Posts within a social community are viewed as more sincere and trustworthy compared to information provided by an online shopping organization, thus more influential on the consumer decision-making process. As a result of social shopping, consumers believe they are making better-informed purchasing decisions (Li & Ku, 2018).

## **User-generated content**

Consumers are no longer the sole complacent recipients of information from marketers. Upgraded communication channels have introduced the interactivity between consumers and organizations, typically on e-commerce sites and social media platforms to influence one another's decision-making process. Many of these interactions take place in the form of user-generated content (Fader & Winer, 2012).

The publishing of information online is shifting from the previous publisher-centric model, driven by organizations, towards a user-centric environment (Sethna et al., 2017). Daugherty et al. (2008) express user-generated content (UGC) as content published by users on an online platform. Colicev et al. (2019) further refine this definition and

state UGC is “brand-related content created by users.” UGC is more prominent than ever, becoming omnipresent across online platforms due to the growth of internet accessibility and online shopping. Although UGC is not a new marketing strategy and has been utilized in various ways by organizations due to its wide scope, UGC is embarking on new beginnings as increasing numbers of organizations are encouraging users to post their opinions and experiences (Agarwal, 2020).

The use of smartphones has enhanced UGC’s ubiquitous characteristics and volume, further portraying its prominence in today’s marketing landscape (Melumad et al., 2019). Previously, consumers may have approached family and friends as their first point of contact in terms of recommendations during their decision-making process. However, Social Media Week (2020) reported that 90% of consumers trust UGC published by users they do not know to influence their purchasing decision whilst considering it a trustworthy indicator of quality. Furthermore, this UGC contributes to an increased speed of purchasing decisions due to the accessibility of influential content generated by others online (Flanagin & Metzger, 2013).

User-generated content is brand-related (Colicev et al., 2019) and is referred to as a marketing strategy throughout literature. Furthermore, UGC is frequently regarded as a benefit to consumers, often cited as “providing value” to the consumer’s decision-making process (Sethna et al., 2017; Momeni et al., 2015). Three elements were explored in the literature published by Bahtar & Muda (2016) in conjunction with the impact of UGC towards online purchasing in regards to the perceived credibility, perceived risk and, perceived usefulness of the UGC.

### **Perceived credibility**

Perceived credibility relates to inferences customers subconsciously create in regards to the trustworthiness of content generated by others (Vries, 2019). Customers that have had prior experiences with a product are viewed as highly influential and are proven to provide more credible content through the eyes of a potential consumer than the content provided by the organization. This is due to the consumer’s perspective of reliability and relatability. The experience economy is an example of an industry that UGC plays a prominent role. Before booking a hotel, many consumers will consult the reviews and images posted by previous customers and make their own initial judgments based upon this (Mendes-Filho et al., 2018).

## Perceived usefulness

The perceived usefulness refers to the value of the content and whether this content can influence a consumer to progress into a further stage in the consumer decision-making process (Hair & Ozcan, 2018). UGC is recognized as “user-friendly” (Barbosa dos Santos, 2021; Kiran & Srivastava, 2020) as opposed to content published by an organization. Increasing numbers of consumers are aware that content published online can be manipulated, for example via photo editing software (Campbell et al., 2021). However, a study conducted by Nightingale et al. (2017) demonstrated that large numbers of the public have a poor ability to identify manipulated imagery. Low-cost, high-quality editing software is a major contributor to the high volumes of manipulated imagery posted online. Perceived usefulness assesses the value of UGC and the impact on the attitudes and behavior of a consumer, thus the influence on one’s decision-making process (Bahtar & Muda, 2016).

## Perceived risk

On the contrary, some consumers will naturally assess the risk associated with relying on UGC to inform their decision-making. Unless a consumer has prior knowledge of a product and previous experiences to prevent them from making a poor decision, the consumer is embarking on a risk by consuming UGC. Perceived risk is concerned with a degree of uncertainty relating to the outcome of a purchasing decision. On balance, many consumers portray seeking UGC as a method to reduce the impact of risk by understanding and consuming other consumers’ opinions (Bahtar & Muda, 2016).

## Organizations using UGC to influence professional marketing materials

UGC in the truest form has not been created or manipulated by an organization (Wyrwoll, 2014). However, over time, some organizations have sourced content created by their consumers that has been posted online and leveraged this to use in their campaigns. For example, luxury fashion retailer Burberry utilized social media to develop a user-led UGC campaign when the brand was struggling to reach younger consumers. Burberry identified the rising trend of “street style photography” and encouraged users to share photos of themselves wearing their classic Burberry trench coat with the hashtag #artofthetrench (see figure 1). Burberry selected a range of images of customers wearing the coat to post on their website (see figure 2). Through this, Burberry had an element

of control and was able to monitor the content, whilst the UGC still provided authenticity. The campaign was one of the first of its kind and was a contributor to the following year e-commerce sales rising by 50 percent (Business Today, 2021).

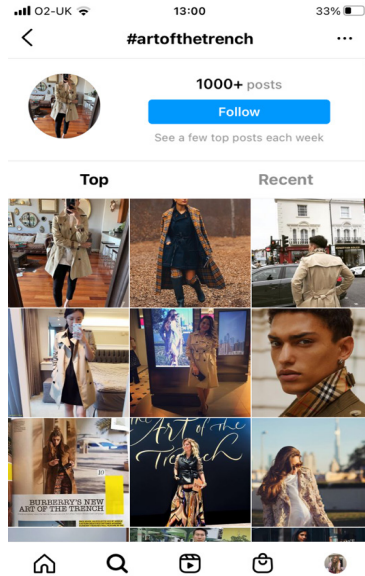


Figure 1: Recent images using #artofthetrench are flooded with users wearing the classic Burberry trench coat (Instagram, 2021)



Figure 2: Burberry website posting UGC to showcase their classic trench coat on customers (Business Today, 2021)

Authors contend whether UGC remains as UGC if adaptations have been made by an organization that move it away from the original which was posted by the consumer online. Common platforms that allow users to publish UGC, such as TripAdvisor, allow organizations to highlight reviews. These are often positive reviews left by satisfied customers. Research by Yi et al. (2019) discovered that organizations must be strategic when highlighting these reviews as consumers can be skeptical of any influence an organization has placed on any form of UGC. Although a highlighted positive review may be the first review the potential consumer reads, this heightened attention does not correlate to enhanced consumption (Yi et al., 2019).

### **UGC posting motivations**

The trend in consumers posting UGC online is growing. As a result of platforms continuing to introduce this feature, encouraging users to post content themselves to aid consumer's decision-making and add to their marketing strategies. However, not all users are comfortable volunteering a post about their experience. Nevertheless, some users will frequently contribute to a UGC functionality without thinking twice. Therefore, understanding the motivations behind users generating content is important to recognize before establishing a campaign that aims to repurpose UGC. On the whole, only a small minority will publish UGC, whilst the remainder of consumers "lurk" amongst the UGC, taking time to read and allowing the UGC to inform their decisions. However, these "lurkers" will still choose to not contribute to the UGC environment (McWilliam, 2000). Frequent research has been conducted into the impact that online communities have on the consumer decision-making process. Experiments have typically found that negative opinions posted online have the most influence on the opinions of others (Schlosser, 2005).

Halliday (2016) explored what motivates young adults to generate and consume content, focusing on a sample of students aged between 20 and 25. He determined that each individual embarks on their own journey and the generation of content is related to one's self-identity. Crowston & Fagnot (2018) further support this by revealing contributors to content are motivated by the perception that a platform needs their contribution because they have the prior experiences to share their judgments and opinions. Furthermore, contributors are influenced by personal motives rather than social factors.



## Hedonic and utilitarian use of UGC

Sethna et al. (2017) discovered that reading and responding to UGC contributes to the enhancement of the hedonic online shopping experience. Users often find reading reviews enjoyable due to their element of practicality when making decisions. However, the design of the website and the format the UGC is visually displayed in is a major contributing factor to whether or not reading reviews is seen as enjoyable. Moreover, the utilitarian use of UGC was found to be more important to brands due to its higher influence, increasing the likelihood of contributing to purchase intention as opposed to the hedonic use of UGC. Consequently, UGC should be incorporated onto websites to aid the convenience of facilitating interaction amongst users.

On the whole, the literature portrays UGC as a positive tool from a consumers' perspective. However, from a brand's perspective, enabling the functionality for consumers to publish UGC on a branded webpage can be a risk. Some UGC can be a great benefit to an organization, as users are persuaded by and trust UGC's authenticity. Moreover unique content free of charge is being provided with little effort or resources from the organization (Goh et al., 2013). On the other hand, to pursue all UGC's benefits, organizations accept the risk that some content may not be in favor of their brand and even detrimental to it in some cases. If an organization has control over their webpages, they can monitor the UGC published, they must be careful to not eliminate all negativity, as this can lead to the dismantlement of users' trust, and potentially even canceling out the positive reviews if users become aware of the dishonesty of the organization (Bakri et al., 2020).

## Consumer decision-making process: Information search

The consumer decision-making process is a five-step process that establishes the fundamental route consumers take when making a purchase: (stage 1) need recognition, (stage 2) information search, (stage 3) evaluation of alternatives, (stage 4) purchase, and (stage 5) post-purchase behavior (Lamb et al., 2017). The consumer decision-making process's structure can be applied to a variation of purchase contexts, although not all purchasing journeys will rigorously follow this exact framework (Vázquez et al., 2014).

This study investigates stage two of the consumer decision-making process: information search. During the information search, the consumer is conducting their

own research to gain an understanding of the product they are intending to purchase. Each consumer will use their individual approach, although convenience is an influencing factor to depend on where or how a consumer will conduct their information search (Gbadamosi et al., 2013). Information search can be quick if the consumer has previously had a positive experience or their needs have been satisfied because they are likely to repurchase and follow the same methods of decision making they had previously. However, if a past experience was negative or a consumer is about to embark on a new purchasing journey, the information search will be more complex (Qazzafi, 2019). Kotler (2017) explains consumers can obtain and retain information from various sources, such as: personal sources, commercial sources, public sources, and experimental sources. UGC would typically be categorized as a “public source.” Kotler (2017) specifies a public source as mass media, social media, online searches, consumer rating organization, and peer reviews.

### **Online shopping information search process**

In recent years, the incorporation of UGC onto websites has provided consumers with a voice of influence to assist other consumers’ information search by providing the functionality for consumers who have tried a product to share their experiences (Hazari et al., 2017). Kasuma et al. (2020) investigated the main factors that “influence customers intention for online shopping” discovering security, website features, and convenience as the main factors that influence the decision-making process when shopping online. Therefore, organizations that would like to adopt the functionality to allow users to post UGC must consider these factors on their website so the UGC can serve its purpose of aiding consumer’s information search stage of the consumer decision-making process (Cheong & Morrison, 2008).

### **Aim and Methodology**

The epistemological approach of this research is interpretative social science. This individual case study aims to decipher the differences between online fashion retailers that offer customers the functionality to post UGC in the form of photos alongside their reviews in comparison to a website that does not have any form of UGC. The exploration of two specific cases generates context and understanding to contribute to research which can be further broadened in the future. In this study, the case study research method nature is supported by qualitative research method.

## Aim

This study will be guided by the following primary research question and sub-research questions:

What impact does user-generated content on the online fashion clothing retailer *SHEIN* have on the information search stage of the consumer decision-making process in comparison to the online fashion clothing retailer *PrettyLittleThing* that does not host user-generated content amongst young female consumers aged 18-26-year-old?

Sub-research questions:

How does user-generated content have an impact on the information search stage of the consumer decision-making model for online fashion clothing retailer *SHEIN*?

What is the impact on the information search stage of the consumer decision-making process when online fashion clothing retailer *PrettyLittleThing* does not host the functionality to display user-generated content?

To achieve valid and reliable results in conjunction with this research question, a sample of twelve 18- to 26-year-old females were interviewed to explore the impact of user-generated content on the information search stage of the consumer decision-making process. From the photo posting perspective, the current research suggests that visual content is significantly more stimulating than text alone (Vazquez et al. 2021). Additionally, reviews are found to contribute to the hedonic online shopping experience because consumers find pleasure in this rather than only looking at the reviews for informative purposes which would contribute to a utilitarian need (Sethna et al, 2017).

## Method

The data collection method for this study is semi-structured in-depth interviews. This is supported by a case study task prior to the in-depth interviews for participants. The task aims to provide guidance, context, and efficiency to the interviewing process.

Non-probability convenience sampling is the sampling method of this study. This research study focuses on females aged 18 to 26. The directly-selected participants have previously shopped on online fashion clothing retailers to ensure familiarity and past experiences can be divulged during the interview. Furthermore, the majority of participants have previously shopped at both *PrettyLittleThing* and *SHEIN*. If they had not, it was ensured they have heard of both websites previously.

The target population of this study is females aged 18 to 26 years old. This specific age group can be justified as the adult population of Generation Z (McKinsey & Company, 2018). However, because the entirety of Generation Z is not being explored during this study, this age group has been referred to as “young consumers.” This age group has been selected because through reviewing the literature surrounding online shopping and the incorporation of UGC, this is a relatively new concept in the online clothing fashion industry landscape. The implementation of UGC on online clothing retailers has begun to break through, therefore exploring young adult consumers is a prominent age group because this age group is likely to pave the way for future trends. The sample size consists of twelve participants.

The case study nature of the research has been achieved through the task that all participants must complete before their semi-structured in-depth interview. All participants explored both websites for 15 minutes, choosing an outfit or item of clothing of their choice. Such freedom allowed the participant to select an item closest to what they would typically purchase, which enhanced authenticity within their experience and findings of the research.

Each interview had a duration of at least 30 minutes to ensure a comprehensive discussion was initiated and the findings were rich in detail. The interviewees were asked about their typical shopping habits and then questions followed relating to the task. During the task section of the interview, participants were encouraged to relate this to their previous experiences, if possible. This enabled a broad insight into their perspectives and opinions surrounding the usefulness of UGC during their information search.

The participants were then asked a series of questions (see appendix two) based upon the research question of this study to explore their motivations and information search. The participants were prompted to refer to both the task and previous experiences

during the interview. The visual elements of each participants' information search were heavily focused on to meet the aims of this study.

The interviews were conducted via video call. This is due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Despite this, video call is convenient due to the participants' being in their own, chosen comfortable environment. Body language could still be observed over the video call (Archibald et al., 2019), which was likely to lead to an enriched discussion. The in-depth interviews have been transcribed and analyzed by thematic analysis. A selection of transcriptions and analysis can be found in appendix four.

## Findings

*SHEIN* and *PrettyLittleThing* have been selected as the online fashion clothing retailers to base this study on because they have similarities in terms of their target demographics, product portfolio size, and pricing, therefore comparative in nature. *SHEIN* and *PrettyLittleThing* both have a very similar target market of young women and teens.

Both brands' mission statements have clear similarities. *SHEIN*'s mission statement reads, "offering on-trend styles from around the globe while rapidly bringing these styles that won't break the bank to both young women and teens" (*SHEIN*, 2021b). *PrettyLittleThing* states, "we believe style should be accessible to all, whatever your budget, as we deliver products inspired from the catwalk." Concerning the information search, there are also major similarities. Therefore, to gain reliable and clear results to contribute efficiently to the outcome of this study, both websites have been comprehensively explored by the author.

The clothing items on both websites have a selection of photos of the clothing being worn by a model from different angles (see figures 3 and 4). The model's measurements are shown allowing the customer to compare themselves to the model and make their decisions based upon this. Both websites also offer a description. *PrettyLittleThing*'s description uses persuasive writing techniques, specifically adjectives, to portray the product. In contrast, *SHEIN*'s product description is concise in descriptive language and conveys a large amount of information in a list format. Both fashion clothing websites also state the obvious information, such as the price and size guide. However, the websites do have differences in terms of influencing their consumers' information search.

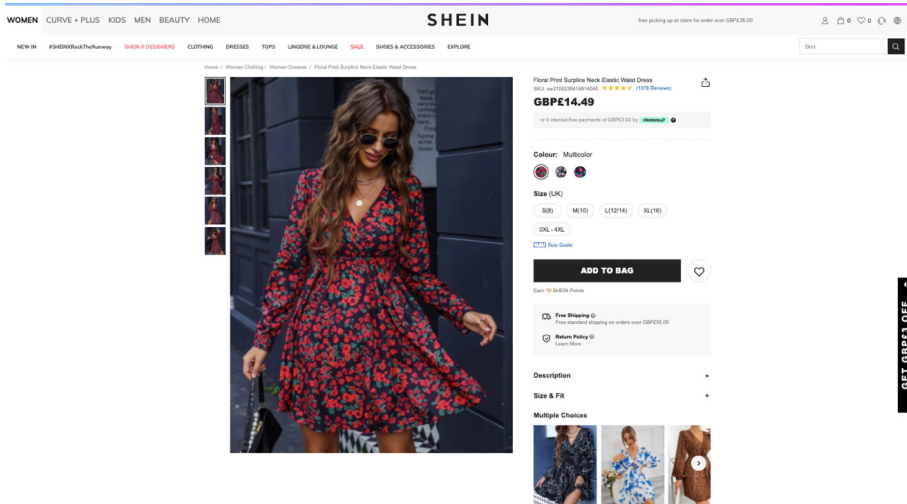


Figure 3: SHEIN website displaying various sources of information (SHEIN, 2021c)

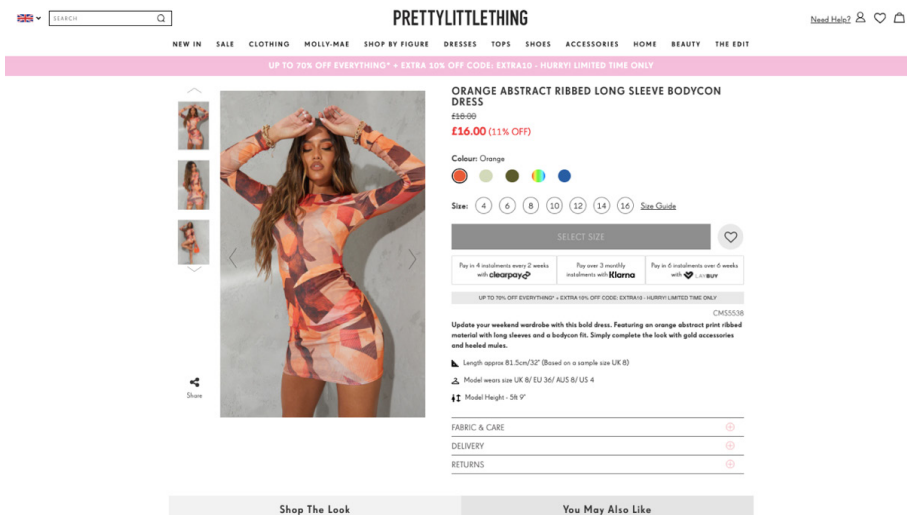


Figure 4: PrettyLittleThing website displaying various sources of information (PrettyLittleThing, 2021c)

While *SHEIN* has the functionality to leave a review with a photo under every item, *PrettyLittleThing* does not. On *SHEIN*, in addition to the review with the photo, customers can leave a rating and complete a poll “Did the item fit well?” (figure five). These are all information sources influenced by customers.

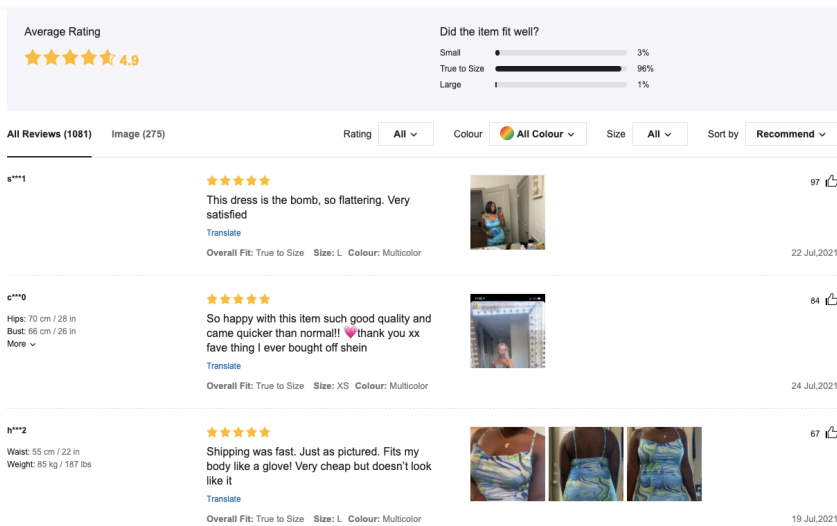
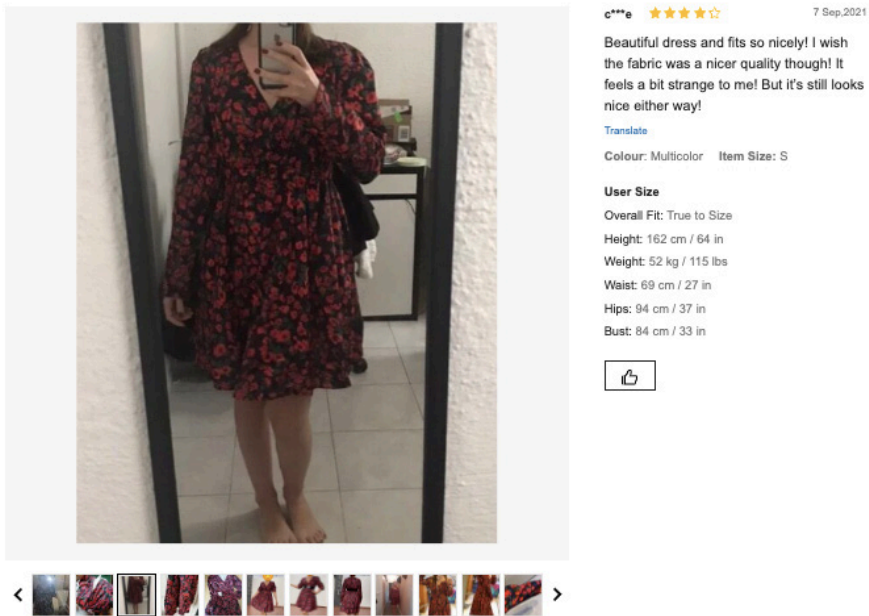


Figure 5: User-generated content on the SHEIN website (SHEIN, 2021c)

The review with photo section allows customers to write a text review and post multiple photos of the item. The functionality is also present to detail their waist, weight, height, bust, and hip measurements along with the size of the item they chose from the website and the overall fit. Consumers can filter the reviews to view customers that have purchased an item of a certain size. The reviews with photos section are user friendly as consumers can choose to browse the text reviews, where some have additional photos, or click through a gallery of the images posted by customers, where the reviews are displayed along the side (figure six). These features depend on the customer preference in terms of whether they believe seeing the photos or the text reviews are the most important asset. On *SHEIN*, customers are encouraged to post a review once they have purchased a product and in return, they can earn points which corresponds to discounts (*SHEIN*, 2021a).



**Figure 6:** SHEIN website, gallery of images posted by customers with reviews displayed alongside (SHEIN, 2021c)

## General online fashion clothing habits and information search

Each participant revealed an individual online fashion clothing shopping experience and method of searching for information. Yet, significant similarities were present throughout. Two-thirds (66.7%) of participants purchase their fashion clothing online. Findings by Mintel (2019) contradict this by explaining that young consumers are multi-channel shoppers, as “sixty-seven percent of young adults shop both online and in-store.” By contrast, only the remaining one-third of the participants in this study described their shopping habits as online and in-store. In the words of one such participant: “I would either go into a shop and see what it’s like on the models and get inspiration from there... or if not just go online and have a browse on what’s new in or what’s trending” (Female A, 22). Further research into the reasoning for this contrast in findings could be the large shift to online shopping because of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (Youn et al., 2021). Large amounts of research have explored the shift in consumption habits due to the pandemic’s significance on a global scale. Considering all participants shop online for fashion clothing, this allows previous experiences to influence responses, which provides further depth and accuracy to the research.



Participants referred to the sources of information available on fashion clothing websites they believe are important and what they would usually explore prior to making a purchase. A variety of information sources were mentioned by participants. The most frequently recurring important information sources when exploring a fashion clothing website were the following: reviews (seven participants), photos (seven participants), size guide (six participants), description (six participants), price (five participants), model statistics (four participants), material (three participants), influencers (two participants), and returns policy (two participants).

These results are a catalyst to the exploration relating to the research question of this study. Identifying that reviews and photos are explored and important to consumers when making a fashion clothing purchasing decision online sets the basis of the findings for this study. Although it must be highlighted that photos in this instance are a very general component and may not correspond to photos posted by consumers, these comments could refer to images of the model or images posted by the organization of the clothing. Consequently, it is subjective.

Amongst research participants, the general consensus of participants communicated that they would explore multiple or external sources to find out information about fashion clothing. Nine participants (75%) would explore other sources outside a website when making a fashion clothing purchase. Eight of these participants would use social media as an external source of information.

I'd see something on social media on someone that's a similar build to me and then I'd go and look for it on the clothing website to purchase myself (Female B, 22),

I'd sometimes look on Depop and stuff to see if other have the item and then see what it actually looks like on, like not on the model (Female F, 22).

These participant responses immediately reflect the preference for viewing the clothing item on other consumers through user-generated content as a stage in the participant's information search. Influencers were again mentioned as a persuasive tool to lead participants to a particular clothing website, "I'd go on a lot of influencers. I'd go on a page on Instagram and it tells you what influencers wear and it tells you where they got it from" (Female C, 19). Another participant had similar views, saying she'd visit "social media websites such as Instagram, where influencers obviously are

and link products that they have bought, so I'd be swayed on the things they are displaying there or a lot of the time I'd watch fashion hauls on YouTube" (Female L, 23).

This method of discovering information through influencers in some circumstances can be the very start of the consumer decision-making process at the problem recognition stage. The problem recognition stage is when a buyer becomes aware of an item they would like to buy (Dibb et al., 2012). In this research, the influencer wearing/displaying an outfit may trigger the problem recognition for the research participants. One participant explained they would specifically seek out reviews from external sources, "for example, if I was on the Nike website, I'd always go on ASOS or another website to try and read more reviews about the clothing product" (Female G, 22). The results show that the age group being investigated are unlikely to make an online fashion clothing purchase impulsively with no forethought and their information search process has depth to aid their understanding.

### ***SHEIN* information search process**

Each participant encountered a different information search process during the completion of the task. Overall, the information elements explored by the participants in order of commonalities on *SHEIN*, were: Reviews with photos (12 participants), photos of the model (three participants), description (three participants), size guide (three participants), ratings (two participants), trends button (one participant), style gallery (one participant), and sale (one participant).

To compare this list to the information sources available on *PrettyLittleThing*. *PrettyLittleThing* does not offer any user-generated content including reviews with photos and ratings by consumers.

These findings immediately prove the power of visual content. This agrees with the research into the fashion industry by Vazquez et al. (2021) that consumers are clearly stimulated by visual experiences. Overall, the top two information elements explored by all participants derive from content posted by others which is formally known as user-generated content. To expand this finding further, the two user-generated pieces of content, reviews with photos and ratings, also correspond to the theory of online social shopping. Consumers understand the advantages of information posted by others to communicate their product knowledge and believe they are making better-informed purchasing decisions as a result of this (Li & Ku, 2018).

On the contrary, it is important to mention some of the brand reputation perspectives the participants shared, generally relating to their previous experiences of shopping with *SHEIN*. Such responses include: "I know the quality can be a bit iffy sometimes" (Female A, 22), "At one time there was a lot of people saying that *SHEIN* was there to scam you, like it's all rubbish clothing" (Female C, 19), and "On *SHEIN*, I do look at reviews because it's a bit of an odd brand I think, so people are a bit worried about how it might actually turn up" (Female I, 22). From these findings, it is clear that *SHEIN* may have a slightly negative reputation regarding trust in their clothing quality. When *SHEIN* is searched on Google, one of the most frequently asked questions in the "people also ask" section is "Is *SHEIN* a safe site to buy from?" This infers others also may have this perspective on the brand. "The reputation that *SHEIN* maybe has as a cheaper website and there's pop ups wherever you look and the stuff with it being an international company maybe makes me feel like that... I wouldn't buy at all if it wasn't for the reviews with photos, but the reviews do tempt me and I have bought previously because of the reviews" (Female E, 22). *SHEIN* are likely to be aware of this, therefore providing the functionality to enable social shopping theory through UGC is *SHEIN*'s mechanism to improve brand reputation.

### ***PrettyLittleThing* information search process**

The most popular sources of information in order of commonalities on *PrettyLittleThing* were: photos of the model (eight participants), description (seven participants), use of filters (seven participants), catwalk video (six participants), model measurements (five participants), fabric and care (four participants), returns (three participants), influencers (two participants), size guide (two participants), price (one participant), and sale (one participant).

To compare this list to the information sources available on *SHEIN*. *SHEIN* does not offer a catwalk video.

Again, the most popular information source related to imagery. Therefore, the answers support the findings by (Kim et al., 2009) that suggest product presentation on a model is significantly more effective due to enhanced positive cognitive and emotional reactions than a product with no context that is in a flat display. Although the description was the second most popular source of information on *PrettyLittleThing*, it received mixed reviews. Some participants found it helpful as it is one of the primary

sources of information on *PrettyLittleThing*. However, some participants recognized the description to be too descriptive and does not add much information content that can aid decision-making;

They talk about what you'd style it with or like the feeling you might get when wearing it, it's all very creative rather than factual... but that information just isn't as important to me (Female I, 22).

I read the description but wouldn't say I got a lot from it (Female J, 22),

This demonstrates the text does not always provide added value to some consumers' information search and they would prefer the content to be direct to the point. To compare this to *SHEIN's* succinct description section, participants much preferred *SHEIN's* description section;

The description section is bullet pointed so rather than being a long bit of text describing that its great, it kind of says specific points about whatever it is you are purchasing rather than describing it in fairy language (Female J, 22),

I would feel a lot more confident based on the description about the product available on *SHEIN* just because of the amount of information they give you and it is easy to read (Female G, 22).

The model statistics were mentioned by five participants. "I also like to look at the size that the model is wearing and the height of that model, so a lot of the time when I would buy from *PrettyLittleThing*, I would look at the height of the model and the size they were wearing to match it up with the size that I would need" (Female L, 23). *SHEIN* also displays the measurements of the model that is on the forefront of the webpage. However, these are overshadowed by the photos posted by the customers as the website has the functionality for customers to post their measurements alongside their photos.

They've also got like little things that you can fill in like overall fit and then like the person's height and weight and the bust and their like measurements which is so helpful if you wanted to like compare your measurements to the garments that they've bought, you could literally guarantee a fit even just from the text (Female G, 22).

This comparison agrees with the previous finding that the reviews with photos are the most influential and preferred information source between both websites.

This relates directly to the conscious and sometimes subconscious comparison of physical appearance experienced by young females when presented with images of others (Marengo et al., 2018). The connotations surrounding the model statistics were generally negative and projected feelings of uncertainty surrounding the models chosen to wear the products on the website. "You get a little bit of information on what size the model is wearing, but realistically no one is like the model, so you don't know if it's going to look like that" (Female J, 22).

The negative inference surrounding the model photos continued into whether the content posted of the models by *PrettyLittleThing* was authentic. "They could literally say anything like about the product and you don't know what's gone into making the garment look how it does on the model. Like, they could have one of the crocodile clips at the back to make it look fitted to their body" (Female G, 22). Digitally literate individuals can have easy access to editing software to manipulate images to their desire, editing a photo is an extremely common concept due to the growth of posting imagery online (Nightingale et al., 2017). Therefore, assuming manipulation is common and suspected.

User-generated content on *SHEIN* versus no user-generated content on *PrettyLittleThing*

All participants recognized that *SHEIN* offers the functionality to post reviews with photos and *PrettyLittleThing* does not offer this functionality.

Firstly, participants were asked specifically about the text reviews. On average participants would read six text reviews before making a purchasing decision. This number was different across the board as some participants revealed they would not read the text or read very little of it: "My eye was probably more drawn to the picture reviews, and I probably skimmed over the text reviews" (Female E, 22). Whereas, one participant exclaimed she read "maybe approximately 20, like 15 to 20 reviews" (Female G, 22). The consensus regarding text reviews was that: "They provide context to the photos" (Female H, 25). Moreover, it is apparent that some text reviews are very unhelpful. Participants recognized that *SHEIN* does not have a filtering system. "A lot of the time, the reviews are just song lyrics or in a foreign language, so no, I don't usually read the

writing” (Female I, 22). This is likely to be because of the incentive in the form of points which can be exchanged for discounts on products on their website. Some participants associated the lack of text review quality with this incentive: “I know there is an incentive for posting a review, like to gain points to get money off, so I think some people do just write random things” (Female A, 22).

Secondly, participants were asked how many photos posted by consumers they looked at during their task. The majority of participants expressed that they had looked through all the photos that had been posted by consumers. “I think I went through like the whole image gallery of photos that were left by customers” (Female G, 22). Most participants also detailed that it was less time-consuming to look through the photos, “More photos definitely, they’re just quicker aren’t they?” (Female C, 19). It was also identified by the participants that there is little perceived risk associated with utilizing the reviews with photos during the information search: “People have not really got a reason to lie, so there’s no there’s no benefit of them lying” (Female K, 24). Moreover, from the previous findings, the participants are aware of the risks of photo manipulation. Most participants seem switched-on regarding this.

In reference to the text reviews and photo reviews together, the participants explained the benefits to their information search of this functionality offered by *SHEIN*.

Gives you more of a visual representative of what I’m looking for and also reading what other people have said about the item can sway decisions when choosing to buy it or not (Female A, 22).

It’s really helpful to be able to see a photo then people’s true thoughts because something you maybe can’t quite identify by just looking at a photo (Female D, 26).

All participants expressed the positive influence the reviews with photos had on their information search. Participants revealed that they are more likely to read a review if it is supported by a photo on *SHEIN* because it is very helpful.

I’d just look at the photo but if I was like probably more unsure then probably the reviews (Female F, 22)

I think the incorporation of a photo with a text review significantly helps to see the fit of the clothing (Female D, 26)

This demonstrated the requirement for photos and reviews to be posted together to provide an element of context in terms of the customer's thoughts and opinions of the garment in addition to the visual photo. The text review in addition to the photo increases the reliability of this information, which has a significant positive influence on the decision-making process.

Consistency was explored by participants in relation to the photos and is a factor taken into consideration, "The fact that there's quite a lot of continuity between the first two photos and then the third photo" (Female E, 22). This demonstrates the depth participants explore when investigating the reviews with photos and the perceived credibility this content possesses. Furthermore, the incorporation of a photo alongside a review revealed participants often skimmed the text when they are posted together. However, they would look in detail at the photo and use the text as an additional source of information if they require it: "I'd just look at the photo, but if I was like probably more unsure, then probably the reviews as well, but I tend to just go more off the photos and see what it's like there" (Female F, 22). This supports the participants' responses that exclaimed they would only look through the gallery of images as a primary source of information if they believed the images provided a sufficient insight into the clothing to make a purchasing decision. These findings agree with the theory of social shopping that consumers believe they make more well-informed decisions as a result of information provided by communities online (Li & Ku, 2018). In addition to this, the research by Vazquez et al. (2021) is certainly further confirmed that consumers are stimulated by visual experiences and this has a positive impact on purchasing intention.

The comparison of physical appearance by the participant was prominent throughout. Ten out of twelve participants admitted they would compare their own physical appearance to an image posted by another consumer. "The customer reviews are definitely a massive plus where I can see photos of people that look kind of like me" (Female D, 26). "I like to see that everyone's different and to see it on different people and body shapes, then from there I can work out what's similar to me" (Female I, 22). Participants also found it to be reassuring, "...one of them, yes, I think she had quite a similar physique to me, which was reassuring" (Female E, 22). This coincides with research conducted by Tiggemann & Anderberg (2020) into females aged 18 to 30 and their perceptions of natural Instagram images versus edited images. The natural images promoted less body dissatisfaction. The images on *SHEIN* posted by consumers are primarily natural images. This appeals to and satisfies consumers. Comparing physical appearance to gain more insight into fashion

clothing aids consumers' decision making by receiving recommendations from others of a similar size in the form of reviews and photos. To compare these findings to *PrettyLittleThing*, similarly, utilizing model measurements as a method of information search was frequent amongst participants, further confirming the comparison of physical appearance is frequent amongst 18 to 26-year-old females. However, participants may benefit from the authenticity of comparing themselves to previous consumers rather than the models, as the issues of lack of authenticity and potential image manipulation were raised by participants: "...but not everyone's like a model, unfortunately" (Female K, 24).

*PrettyLittleThing* does not have a source of user-generated content on their website. Despite this, on the whole, the majority of participants would return their custom to the website. In comparison to *SHEIN*, *PrettyLittleThing* received significantly fewer comments in terms of inconsistency and reputation, making it clear *PrettyLittleThing* has a stable brand reputation amongst respondents.

I'd still be tempted to buy from *PrettyLittleThing* just because of the reputation that *SHEIN* maybe has as a cheaper website and there's pop ups wherever you look and the stuff with it being an international company maybe makes me feel like that (Female E, 22).

[On] *PrettyLittleThing*, there's just a little bit of information just under it, and if I wanted to see it on an influencer, I'd have to go on Instagram. But on *PrettyLittleThing*, I just hope for the best (Female C, 19)

Due to *PrettyLittleThing's* strong brand reputation, participants do not need the UGC to be the deciding factor to whether they make a purchase or not. Previous experiences and positive perceptions of the brand are enough prior information to make a purchasing decision. Additionally, participants have navigated their own method of discovering information on this particular website, such as through influencers. Despite this, when participants were asked to compare both information search experiences between the brands, the majority of participants spoke highly of *SHEIN's* functionality to read reviews with photos. This led to participants suggesting that *PrettyLittleThing* should incorporate this functionality to further aid the information search.

Definitely to have some sort of reviews on the page as they don't have any at all. Something like *SHEIN* with the photos and reviews would be great (Female D, 26).



Although it is evident that the user-generated content on *SHEIN* is the most influential and helpful information source, participants were still able to conduct a sufficient information search using different forms of information on the *PrettyLittleThing* website. One element that stood out is their “quick returns policy”: “I will still buy from there though and return it if I don’t like it” (Female C, 19). Clearly, a high rate of customer returns is ineffective for a fashion clothing brand. Despite this, the comparison was inevitable with *SHEIN* and the UGC functionality they offer, “but reviews on *PrettyLittleThing* would be good to save me time and money” (Female C, 19). After considering UGC in-depth during the interviews, some participants did respond that they would “feel a lot less confident” (Female G, 22), shopping on *PrettyLittleThing* after digesting that “there’s no reviews, all you can really see is that what size the model is and how tall she is, but yeah, like, there’s absolutely no review, so possibly a bigger chance of sending it back because you don’t know exactly what you are buying, and it’s just photos taken by like a photographer versus someone real with their phone” (Female K, 24).

### **User-generated content – hedonic needs**

The user-generated content also satisfied the hedonic needs of the consumer journey in comparison to only exploring the basic information for practical reasons which would be utilitarian. This finding agrees with Sethna et al. (2017) findings into UGC in the form of reviews and the hedonic viewpoint of consumers. When each participant was asked, “On which website did you find the information search most enjoyable?” Eleven out of twelve participants responded with *SHEIN*. The rationale from the participants substantially communicated this was because of the “reviews with photos.” Consequently, there is more information available: “...*SHEIN* because there is just more information available” (Female A, 22); “...*SHEIN* because of all the reviews and photos making things more reliable and relatable” (Female D, 26). Each individual consumer has a motivation to shop online. Consumers are found to engage in online shopping activities for pleasure (Bhatia, 2019). Hence, satisfying hedonic needs is extremely important.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This research is one of the first within the UGC fashion industry field (Vazquez et al., 2021). Overall, user-generated content significantly aids the information search for consumers and is favored. It was found the age group of the study (18 to 26) have a conscious desire to compare themselves to others’ physical appearance to aid the

utilitarian need of correct sizing to avoid wasting time by returning an item (Apeageyi, 2008). The comparison of physical appearance was prominent throughout the case study research. Brands such as *PrettyLittleThing* should be aware that consumers are skeptical of manipulated imagery and authentic visuals are preferred and significantly influence the information search stage of the consumer decision-making process.

Agreeing with Li & Ku (2018), consumers place their trust in others when it is posted in a social community, irrelevant to who has posted the content. Participants found the reviews with photos to be credible and the most influential factor out of all information sources available to aid their decision-making process.

Furthermore, brands should also acknowledge that consumers prefer to explore authentic user-generated photos that are supported by text to provide context relating to the thoughts and feelings of the consumer wearing the garment. Moreover, organizations should also be aware that any information source that has a target audience of 18 to 26-year-olds should be short in length to suit the attention spans of the upcoming generations (Forbes, 2017), as participants generally focus their attention on the visuals and skim the text. However, the text is required to progress the information search of the decision-making process.

Following on from this, the UGC in the form of reviews with photos satisfied the hedonic needs during the information search, as many find this to be a more enjoyable experience than only reading basic information about the product to discover more, which is a utilitarian need. This finding is in line with the findings of Sethna et al. (2017) that reading and responding to UGC contributes to the enhancement of the hedonic online shopping experience. Many brands in the fashion industry can take this into consideration as on the whole: consumers seek online shopping experiences to find pleasure (Bhatia, 2019).

It is vital for organizations to note that if a brand does not have a positive reputation, it can be difficult for the UGC element to succeed. However, *SHEIN* is an example of a brand that is utilizing UGC to enhance its reputation. *PrettyLittleThing* currently has a positive brand reputation, therefore the impact of UGC may not be as significant. Moreover, it is recommended that reviews with photos would be extremely beneficial to brands such as *PrettyLittleThing* to enhance the consumers' information search process by gaining influence from consumers not associated with the brand to convey

the element of authenticity. The basic understandings within this research can inform and persuade organizations that UGC in the form of reviews with photos are extremely influential particularly amongst 18 to 26 year-old females.

The method of case study research has its limitations. The exploration of only two brands within the case study nature is a limitation (Tight, 2017). To ensure the results are increasingly generalizable, more than two contrasting fashion brands could be investigated in terms of UGC to ensure the results are increasingly applicable across the industry.

Furthermore, only females were investigated. To explore this topic on a broader scale and gain further accurate results into UGC in a wider context, more than one gender should be examined.

This research is confined to the fashion industry. Although the findings are extremely relevant within this industry, these may not be generalizable to another industry, such as technology. The nature of the fashion industry has been taken into high consideration, including the comparison of physical appearance and social acceptance. Additionally, the decision-making process evidently differs per industry.

Although the interviews were in-depth, therefore rich in information, the sample size only consisted of twelve participants. Moreover, as this is one of the first research studies on this subject, this information is very informative and sets the research field up for future studies. Increasing the sample size by conducting a follow-up quantitative study to increase the numbers of participants could be beneficial in the future to add to this field of research, providing a broader spectrum of findings and ideas.

Follow-up research can be conducted to tackle and limit any limitations associated with this study. In the future, a broader approach away from case study research should be implemented to gain a wider outlook on UGC within the fashion industry. Likewise, the sample could be expanded to include more diversity in a variety of contexts, such as age, gender and, ethnicity. To contrast, yet support the qualitative findings in this research, a quantitative study could be conducted to achieve a larger sample size.

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