

Impact of digitalisation in terms of consumer awareness and customer loyalty on European apparel brands of different sizes and forms

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Abstract: Digital transformation has a significant impact on marketing. The purpose of this study is to explore how European apparel brands of different sizes and forms are impacted by digitalization in terms of consumer purchase decisions, consumer awareness and customer loyalty. The findings of this study have indicated digital Transformation has a significant and positive effect size on both Consumer Purchase Intention and Consumer Awareness and managers of the European Apparel Industry should focus on promoting discounts and sales through social media platforms to increase their purchasing intention.

1. Introduction

In the ever-changing world of fashion, businesses of all sizes need to stay ahead by not only following the trend but also revolutionising the way they connect to their customers. A major challenge faced by numerous fashion brands is that they increasingly fall behind the expectations of their consumers. The role of the consumer has shifted from one of passive observance to enabled dominance (Deloitte, 2018)[1]. The desires of customers have also changed as they now want interaction and belongingness from the brand. Bringé (2023) mentioned that the digitally savvy customers of the current generation are looking for more than just products from fashion brands[2]. Moreover, Gonzalo et al. (2020) have stated the business direction of small and medium-sized companies shows a change from the COVID-19 era, such as the sales rate increases by 20% with the traffic of 100 European apparel brands' websites rising by 45% in just one year[3].

Some of the top European fashion brands, such as H&M, Zara, Levi's, ASOS, and Burberry use digitalised platforms to target their customers (Noris & Cantoni, 2022; Pal & Jayarathne, 2022)[4][5]. Along with these big brands, some small brands, such as Spirit and Grace, Freya McKee, and Valliant Studio follow the digitalised marketing system through the use of Instagram and Facebook (Goodings, 2022)[6]. Therefore, the competitiveness of digitalised platforms shows an increase (Ananda et al., 2017)[7]. Different studies have already been completed by focusing on digitalisation practices in the social media marketing of fashion brands (Abouzeid, 2020; Mekonnen & Larner, 2021; Scuotto et al., 2017)[8][9][10]. There is a lack of studies that compare the digital transformation and social media engagement influencing customer awareness and customer loyalty among big as well as small European apparel brands. The rationale of this study is to fill the gap in analysing the impact of digitalisation on customer awareness and loyalty of European apparel brands of all sizes and types. The result of the study helps marketing managers focus on digitalised technology to spread awareness among customers to get their loyalty.

Aim:

The current study aims to explore how European apparel brands of different sizes and forms are impacted by digitalisation in terms of consumer awareness and customer loyalty.

Objectives:

- To understand the impact of digital technology adoption on the purchasing intention of the consumers of European apparel companies

- To find out whether the European apparel companies have been able to build customer awareness by implementing digital transformation
- To establish a correlation between social media engagement and customer loyalty in the European apparel sector

2. Literature Review

Digital transformation is increasingly adopted by both local and international brands, driven by the rapid advancements in internet and digital technologies. According to Schwertner (2017), the vision and goal of an organisation have to be aligned with digital transformation as it helps to achieve the goal easily[11]. George and Schillebeeckx (2022) note that while digitalisation raises operational costs, it also boosts efficiency and market reach[12].

Schmitt and Baldegger (2020) observe that international brands typically achieve higher levels of digitalisation due to their greater resources, which allows for comprehensive integration of technology in supply chains and marketing[13]. Conversely, SMEs often focus on cost-effective digital strategies like social media marketing. Akhtar et al. (2022) discussed that innovations like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Amazon Web Services (AWS) by companies such as Amazon have personalised consumer experiences, enhancing satisfaction and purchase intent[14].

Casciani et al. (2022) discuss the adoption of 3D virtual and digital technologies (3DVD) in the fashion industry, streamlining design to retail processes and catering rapidly to consumer needs[15]. However, Scuotto et al. (2019) point out that while SMEs aim for cost reduction, large firms focus on improving service quality through digital technologies[16]. Feroz et al. (2021) mentioned the environmental and economic sustainability benefits of digital transformation[17], which is crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic and forced a pivot to digital strategies, particularly in European markets.

Based on this description, a hypothesis can be formed:

H1: *Digital transformation of the European apparel industry imposes a significant impact on the purchasing intention of the consumers*

The purchase intention of customers changes along with the adoption of digital technologies. Matarazzo et al. (2021) have stated that digital transformation helps in increasing the awareness of consumers about the products or services of a brand by increasing the availability of information on online platforms, mobile applications as well as social media platforms[18]. Therefore, this technology allows a company to make contact with customers easily. Gielens and Steenkamp (2019) also stated that brands are often using digital platforms to promote their sustainable initiatives[19]. Thus, digitalisation helps to promote sustainable business practices. Matarazzo et al. (2021) have highlighted that both MNCs and SMEs established in the Italian fashion industry have increased their online presence and invested in several digital platforms and e-commerce websites. For example, Patagonia uses storylines through different social media channels to spread awareness of environmental concerns and also promote eco-friendly actions of the brand. Colombi et al. (2018) have highlighted how Zara[20], an international brand, uses Augmented Reality (AR) to enhance consumer awareness in Spain. The adoption of this technology allows customers to check clothes on them from a specific place. This service aims to enhance the experience of the consumers along with helping them understand how the specific apparel will look on them so that they can make informed decisions. Conversely, Moye and Kincade (2003) have critiqued that older people may take this digitalisation in a negative way as a lack of skill may hamper their shopping experiences[21]. However, people are becoming aware of the benefits of using modern technology, which allows them to get knowledge about new products.

Based on this description, a hypothesis can be formed:

H2: *Digital transformation positively impacts the level of customer awareness among European apparel brands*

Social media engagement enhances the ability of the company to enhance consumer loyalty. Icha and Agwu (2015) have highlighted that social media platforms enable organisations to directly communicate with consumers through live sessions and in the comment section[22]. This kind of

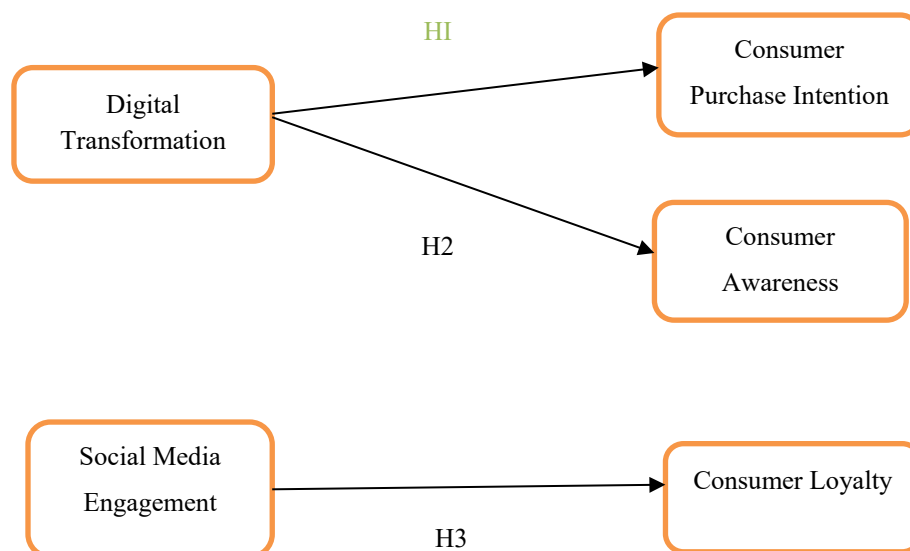
communication helps in the formation of direct communication of customers with the brand, which feels the customer's values and enhances their loyalty to the company. Conversely, Kohli et al. (2015) have critiqued that content on social media platforms sometimes shows negative content regarding a brand which hampers customer loyalty[23]. However, customers focus on content available on different social media sites instead of focusing on a single negative review. According to Eyada (2020)[24], a significant number of apparel brands, irrespective of their sizes, use social media platforms to engage with consumers, understand their needs and perceptions, and thereby develop a positive relationship with them. For example, Nike uses social media platforms to promote the inclusivity of their products along with posting inspirational stories. For example, the highly popular international apparel-selling brand Lululemon has social media groups for fitness and yoga enthusiasts where a wide range of fitness advice and discussion on wellness takes place. Mangold and Faulds (2009) have highlighted that a wide number of brands post exclusive offers and discounts on their social media pages and encourage consumers to purchase the product through their official websites or through e-commerce websites to gain the discount [25]. Therefore, making intensive communication through digitalisation helps to increase the loyalty of customers for a particular brand.

Based on this description, a hypothesis can be formed:

H3: *The digitalisation of European apparel brands through social media marketing has a positive relationship with an increase in customer loyalty*

This study has also identified some gaps in the existing literature, such as a significant number of articles focused on the Global apparel industry or apparel industry of non-European nations (Scuotto et al., 2019; Matarazzo et al., 2021)[16][18]. Secondly, while some articles focus on the European apparel industry, none of them are investigating the impact of digital transformation on all three factors; which are going to be resolved through this study.

The perception of potential users has been analysed by focusing on the factors of TAM, such as the perceived usefulness and ease of use of a technology, proposed by Fred Davis in 1986 (Davis 1989)[26]. The technology implementation and its impact on the European apparel industry have been analysed effectively through this model (See Figure 1).



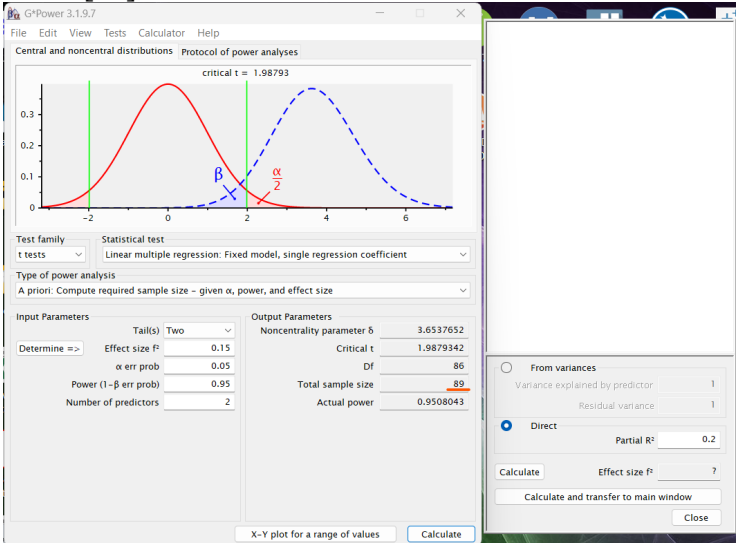
(Source: Self-developed)

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

3. Method

The method of this research followed the onion framework from the outer layer to the inner layers (Saunders & Bezzina, 2015)[27]. The research was performed survey by following by quantitative method. Moreover, the population chosen for this study is the consumers of the European Apparel industry. For sampling, the non-probability convenience sampling method has been selected for this

research which helps to collect information based on the availability and accessibility of respondents. This study collected data from popular social media platforms since the target population was more accessible through social media platforms. Dixon (2024) has highlighted Facebook and Instagram as two of the most used social media platforms in Europe. Hence for this research, these 2 social platforms have been chosen[28].



(Source: Self-developed)

Figure 2: G power Sample size analysis

Figure 2 shows the result of G power, it was found that at least 89 samples were required to conduct the study. Through social media platforms, the researcher reached out to a total number of 560 candidates, among which 152 participants took part in this research. The data collection process was completed by the development of 25 close-ended questions. The items of each scale were identified from relevant existing literature. A 4 item-scale of Digital Transformation has been adopted from Sharma (2018)[29]. A 4 item-scale of customer loyalty has been adopted from Dehghan and Shahin (2011)[30]. A 4 item-scale of Customer Awareness has been adopted from Susilowati and Sari (2020)[31]. A 6 item-scale of Social Media Engagement has been adopted from Al-Menayes (2015)[32]. Lastly, a 3-item scale has been adopted by Ganguly et al. (2010) to measure Customer Purchase Intention[33]. In the following table, the variables and their corresponding items and sources have been represented. The collected insights were analysed with the help of SPSS software which allowed for determining the reliability of the data set. This method allows to complete the data analysis within a short time and also helps in the development of accurate data. This study also focuses on ethical aspects as this study does not collect any personal information of respondents such as name and contact details during the survey.

4. Findings

After excluding the invalid responses finally, 144 responses were taken for the analysis and it is the final sample size of this study. As per Table 1, a total of 50% of participants are Female and a total of 37.5% are Male. Therefore, the proportion of female participants is larger. In terms of age, 41.7% of participants are 30 to 34 years old, 29.2% are 24 to 29 years old and 16.7% are 18 to 23 years old. Therefore, collectively 87.5% of participants are between 18 to 34 years old. Therefore, participants are mostly young.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	54	37.5
	Female	72	50.0
	Other	12	8.3
	Prefer not to say	6	4.2
Age	18-23	24	16.7
	24-29	42	29.2
	30-34	60	41.7
	35-40	12	8.3
	Above 40	6	4.2
Total		144	100.0

5. Regression analysis

As per Table 2, the R-square value is only 0.043, and therefore Digital Transformation can predict a 4.3% variance in the consumer purchase intention. It indicates that the model fit is very low. The ANOVA result showed that the regression model can statistically significantly predict Consumer Purchase Intention ($F = 6.408$, $p < 0.05$). From the coefficient results it can be found that the Digital Transformation ($B = 0.141$, $p < 0.05$) has a significant positive effect size on the Consumer Purchase Intention. Therefore, Hypothesis H1 is accepted. It indicates that the increased level of Digital Transformation by an apparel brand significantly increases Consumer Purchase Intention which can also influence sales.

Table 2: Regression Result to Test Hypothesis H1

Model Summary					
	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
	0.208	0.043	0.036	0.83354	
ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	4.452	1	4.452	6.408	0.012
Residual	98.659	142	0.695		
Total	103.111	143			
Coefficients					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.902	0.184		15.782	0.000
Digital Transformation	0.141	0.056	0.208	2.531	0.012

a. Predictors: (Constant), Digital Transformation

b. Dependent Variable: Consumer Purchase Intention

Table 3: Regression Result to Test Hypothesis H2

Model Summary					
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
0.306	0.094	0.087	0.83647		
ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	10.268	1	10.268	14.675	.000 ^b
Residual	99.355	142	0.700		
Total	109.623	143			
Coefficients					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error			
(Constant)	2.849	0.185		15.437	0.000
Digital Transformation	0.214	0.056	0.306	3.831	0.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Digital Transformation

b. Dependent Variable: Consumer Awareness

According to Table 3, the R-square value is only 0.093, which indicates Digital Transformation can predict a 9.4% variance in consumer purchase intention. It indicates that the model fit is very low. However, Digital Transformation has better predictability on Consumer Awareness than Consumer Purchase Intention. The ANOVA result showed that the regression model can statistically significantly predict Consumer Purchase Intention ($F = 14.675$, $p < 0.05$). From the coefficient results it can be found that the Digital Transformation ($B = 0.214$, $p < 0.05$) has a significant positive effect size on the Consumer Purchase Intention. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is accepted. The effect size of this regression model is also stronger than the regression model for Consumer Purchase Intention. It indicates that the increased level of Digital Transformation by an apparel brand significantly increases Consumer Awareness.

As per Table 4, the R-square value is 0.174, which indicates Social Media Engagement and Digital Transformation can predict a 17.4% variance in consumer purchase intention. It shows that the model fit is very low and several other factors are not considered to predict Consumer Loyalty. The ANOVA result showed that the regression model cannot statistically significantly predict Consumer Purchase Intention ($F = 2.024$, $p = 0.144$). From the coefficient table, it can be found that Social Media Engagement ($B = 0.174$, $p < 0.05$) has a significant positive effect size on Consumer Loyalty. Digital Transformation is not a significant predictor and it has no independent effect on Consumer Loyalty. Therefore, hypothesis 3 is accepted. It indicates that the increased level of Social Media Engagement by Consumers significantly increases their Consumer Loyalty towards an apparel brand.

Table 4: Regression Result to Test Hypothesis H3

Model Summary					
	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
	0.174	0.030	0.017	0.92747	
ANOVA					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	3.793	2	1.896	2.204	0.114
Residual	121.289	141	0.860		
Total	125.082	143			
Coefficients					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.243	0.386		5.816	0.000
Digital Transformation	0.040	0.062	0.054	0.650	0.517
Social Media Engagement	0.174	0.087	0.166	2.002	0.047

a. Predictors: (Constant), Social Media Engagement, Digital Transformation

b. Dependent Variable: Consumer Loyalty

6. Discussion

This section synthesises the research findings along with interpreting their implications and thus highlights the contribution and significance of a study.

The integration of advanced technologies to enhance personalization as well as convenience of consumers, helps the European Apparel industry's purchasing intentions to grow positively in the digital transformation. According to Akhtar et al. (2022) and Bertola and Teunissen (2018)[34], the use of digital tools gives recommendations based on consumer behaviour that increase the ease of consumers' willingness to buy. Furthermore, features such as online fitting rooms and simplified check out procession helped consumers in making the decision. As mentioned by Govuzela and Mafini (2019)[35], digital platforms allow effective celebrity endorsements that get to a much wider audience faster and influence the purchasing decisions. Furthermore, Casciani et al. (2022) brings forth that advances in digital manufacturing and supply chains shorten delivery time and make the most recent trends accessible, and meeting consumer delight and purchase wish[15]. Feroz et al. (2021) also state that digitalisation also leads to green practices, that are attractive to eco-conscious consumers and to build brand goodwill. Nevertheless, the influence of digital transformation on consumer awareness is quicker than on purchasing decisions [17].

Related to this, this study furthermore shows that digital transformation has considerably increased

awareness of consumers in the European Apparel industry. According to Matarazzo et al. (2021) and Shadkam and O'Hara (2013)[36], digital channel such as social media and platforms for e-commerce improve product and service exposure and are beneficial for increasing brand reach and multiple frequent content provision[36]. Digital strategies involve the adoption not just of the strategies though it boost brand awareness and promote sustainability. For example, digital storytelling on the Patagonia website provides customers with information on the company's environmental initiatives and encourages customer loyalty and purchase intent through better transparency in sustainable practices and ethics sourcing. Moreover, the data indicate that consumers are aware of the attributes of the product mainly advertised through social media, including the packaging and the brand values. Hence, awareness of pricing and discounts is lower, particularly among luxury brands which are more concerned with enhancing material quality than cost-related advantages, and corporate social responsibility.

The study finds that social media engagement positively impacts consumer loyalty in the European apparel industry, aligning with existing literature. Brands like Nike effectively use social media to communicate directly with consumers, address their needs and build emotional connections (Eyada, 2020)[24]. This direct interaction not only helps resolve queries but also tailors products to consumer feedback, enhancing loyalty. Despite potential negative publicity, an active social media presence allows brands to manage such issues effectively. Moreover, initiatives like social media groups and celebrity endorsements further boost consumer loyalty. However, the study also notes that current consumer loyalty levels are only moderate, suggesting that many European apparel brands might still be underutilising social media strategies to fully engage and retain their target audience.

7. Conclusion

Digital transformation has positively influenced the European apparel industry, enhancing consumer purchasing intentions, awareness, and loyalty. Advanced technologies like Artificial Intelligence and data analytics have optimised manufacturing, supply chain, and logistics, improved brands' engagement and understanding of consumer needs. Social media, requiring less investment compared to other digital initiatives, has been widely adopted by both local and international brands. Regular updates on social media platforms inform and engage consumers, boosting their brand loyalty. Additionally, e-commerce platforms expand brands' reach beyond traditional advertising methods, increasing consumer access and information frequency. Augmented reality offers immersive experiences, allowing consumers to virtually try apparel, which enhances product understanding. Personalisation through AI algorithms analyses purchasing behaviours to offer targeted recommendations, increasing consumer satisfaction and purchase likelihood. Influencer and celebrity promotions further spur purchasing desires among consumers.

According to Bertola and Teunissen (2018), the majority of the lower middle-class to middle-class consumers of the fast fashion industry are price-sensitive. Therefore, managers of the European Apparel Industry, along with promoting their values and other attributes of their products, should also focus on promoting discounts and sales through social media platforms, so that consumer awareness can be increased along with their purchasing intention. However, this study has not collected detailed secondary data about this industry which may hamper the impact of descriptive data of the study. Hence this creates a future scope for researchers to obtain this information and incorporate it while finding out the impact of digital transformation on the European apparel industry. Another major limitation of this research is that in this study the researcher has not evaluated the relationship between the two independent variables, that is, digital transformation and social media engagement. This has created a scope for future researchers to further evaluate this relationship in future researchers.

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