Chapter 15
Size Recommendations in Online Fashion Retail: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes the e-Size project as well as presenting the preliminary results of its exploratory survey administered to a sample of customers in the attempt to establish whether the integration of a size recommendation application into a menswear fashion retail website had been successfully achieved by verifying the size recommendations made by the application. From the preliminary findings, it emerges that all participants found the size recommendation application easy to use. The majority of participants received the correct size recommendation from the application, and would be willing to use the application due to its helpfulness in providing a size recommendation when shopping online. However, users’ personal style and fit preference is an important factor, irrespective of the size that fits them correctly by integrating additional garment and fit information into the application, retailers can ensure every user will be able to receive a tailored recommendation that meets both their size and personal style preference.

INTRODUCTION

Drawing on our existing research (Peng et al., 2016; Vecchi et al., 2014, 2015, 2016; Vecchi and Buckley, 2016), e-Size is a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, exploring how online fashion retailers can utilise innovative technology to give consumers the ability to match their size and find the perfect fitting garment.

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By assessing the implementation and the deployment of novel yet existing software applications that capture body measurements and provide accurate garment size recommendations, in an online menswear retailer, the e-Size project aims to improve shopper satisfaction, increase fashion garments’ online sales, and reduce product return rates.

The key objectives of the research being - to further develop an existing software application aimed at producing accurate body measurements in close collaboration with an online fashion retail partner; to enhance the retailers customers’ satisfaction by improving the quality of their online shopping experience; to focus on user experience testing to contribute to the development of the user experience; to critically evaluate the opportunities and the challenges that are associated with the deployment and implementation of such novel software application for the retailer and for the broader fashion industry; to contribute to the reduction of the economic and environmental impact associated with garments’ returns due to their poor fit.

More specifically, this project focuses on user experience testing - observing how customers interact with the size recommendation application, integrating feedback from customers into the sizing information provided by the application, providing guidance on improving the user experience of the application, and thereby the online shopping experience, and integrating feedback on the garment information into the retailer’s operations.

The keys to this are the quality of the measurement data from the retailer, overall user satisfaction with the online experience, accuracy of the personal information provided by the user, and the effectiveness of the size recommendation application in matching body and garment measurements so the consumer can find the best fitting clothing size. This paper consists of four sections. The first section outlines the literature review, the second section describes the methodology adopted. While the third section highlights the preliminary findings of the research, the final section illustrates the conclusion, the limitation of the application in its current state and directions for further research.

Online Fashion Retail: Benefits and Challenges

Today, within the fashion industry, E-retail conceived as a web presence alone (Ha & Stoel, 2012), is not sufficient for any high street retailer to operate or promote themselves. Doherty et al. (1999) suggested that the Internet adoption might not be a viable strategy for all retailers, as the likelihood of an organisation succeeding in their investment decision would be dependent upon the retailer’s specific internal and environmental inhibitors and facilitators. More specifically, it was argued that only those retailers with an appropriate blend of technological and organisational capabilities and an appropriate product offering, which were operating in Internet-friendly market-place, should contemplate Internet retailing, at least until the market and technology were more mature. Moreover, it was suggested that certain products categories were likely to have the greatest growth potential and opportunity to create competitive advantage: books, music, computers, and airline tickets were viewed as potential winners, whilst clothing and fashion goods were tipped as losers (De Figueiredo, 2000).

Traditionally, the term ‘channel’ described the flow of a product from source to end-user. This definition implies a passive unidirectional system whereby the manufacturer / producer marketed through a wholesaler or retailer to the consumer (Davies, 1993). The concept of the retailer as simply the final distributor has been supported by the emphasis on “buying decisions, operational concerns” and overall “product orientation” (Mulhern, 1997). However, recent developments in information technology are changing this orientation by enabling retailers to focus their marketing efforts on managing the customers more