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## INSIGHTS ON CONSUMER ONLINE PURCHASE DECISIONS OF WOMEN'S FOOTWEAR

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**Abstract:** Shoes are probably one of the most difficult products to sell online due to the high need-for-touch (NFT) displayed: people need to experiment the product before buying it, more than in any other item. On another hand, women are more prone than men to buy fashion and apparel products through the web channel. This paper investigates the factors driving women consumers to shop footwear products online. A qualitative research method was used grounded on semi-structured, in-depth interviews that were conducted to corroborate the constructs defined in the proposed conceptual model namely: convenience, recreation, NFT and social e-shopping. The interviews were focused on the demand side to understand the female consumers' perspective and on the top managers of women's shoes companies representing the suppliers' viewpoint. The results show that women highly appreciate the convenience that shopping shoes online provides as well as its recreational nature. The NFT also stands out in the shoe market context mainly due to the particularities related to shoe size. Additionally, social e-shopping was found not be as important for women as anticipated as they see social networks more as a communication platform for brands, and less as a factor that influences their predisposition to shop shoes online. On the suppliers' side, the interviews revealed that managers believe in bloggers and social media influence and its consideration as part of the overall marketing strategy.

**JEL classification:** M30, M31, M160;

**Keywords:** Marketing, Online Shopping; Shoes; Women preferences

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## 1. Introduction

The strong development of the e-commerce industry has led to an enormous number of transactions and changes on consumer buying behaviour in the transition from the physical store to the online store (Kwak, Fox, & Zinkhan, 2002; Raman, 2014). This has triggered the interest of many researchers trying to understand what drives consumers to shop online. This change is simultaneously challenging the traditional commerce and reshaping consumers' shopping habits (Chiang & Dholakia, 2003; Rigby, 2011).

Several studies have explored the gender differences in online shopping, the majority (e.g. Hasan, 2010; Lian & Yen, 2014; K. Z. K. Zhang, Cheung, & Lee, 2014; L. Zhang, Xu, Ye, & Wang, 2012) concluding for the existence of differences between women and men. According to Rodgers & Harris (2003), more men than women engage in online shopping activities and make more online purchases. Dittmar, Long & Meek (2004) claim that men's attitude is almost the same in both traditionally and online shopping formats, while women's attitude suffer a significantly variation as they become less favourable toward online shopping. Getting to know the reasons behind women online shopping behaviour is of major importance for marketers that aim to target a female audience in the online channel. One of the reasons for this may be due to higher level of need-for-touch (NFT) displayed by women (Workman, 2010; Cho, Workman, 2011). This seems to be acuter in products also displaying higher NFT, as it is the case of experiential goods, such as clothing and shoes, which require a direct and physical experience of touch (Lynch, Kent, Srinivasan, 2001; Rodrigues, Silva, Duarte, 2017; Chiang, Dholakia, 2003).

The attempt to sell online experience goods with high NFT nature, like shoes, particularly to a female audience, tends to be a difficult task for companies. Therefore, trying to shed some insights on this issue, this paper uncovers the main factors that lead female consumers to engage in the online purchase of shoes market and seeks to understand the demand side of this market. Concurrently, focusing on the suppliers' opinion it also looks to understand the offer perspective and how firm's online business strategy incorporates these factors. Therefore, the following research questions drive the study: What are the main factors driving female consumers to purchase shoes online? How does the demand side and supply sides acknowledge these factors?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. *Factors influencing consumers' online shopping*

Online consumers can purchase products from any place at any time they want, so time and cost of traveling to and from shops are virtually eliminated (Chiang, Dholakia, 2003). The ability to shop without leaving home or office and having the products brought to the door is of major interest to many consumers (Chen, Chang, 2003). Online shopping allows consumer to have more control and bargaining power since they have access to large amounts of easy and free information (Javadi, Dolatabadi, Nourbakhsh, Poursaeedi, Asadollahi, 2012). Consequently, this allows shoppers to engage in more efficient shopping activities, once the search cost is

reduced, and brings advantages for both consumers and vendors (Alba, Lynch, Weitz, Janiszewski, Lutz, Sawyer, Wood, 1997; Kalakota, Whinston, 1997). Nevertheless, this shopping format may have some drawbacks when compared to brick-and-mortar stores, since consumers cannot see, touch, taste or smell the products they are buying (Peck, Childers, 2003). This can drive them to develop low trust and high levels of risk, mainly due to the lack of face-to-face communication (Javadi et al., 2012).

Chen and Chang (2003) highlight three common components of the online shopping process that are crucial to its success: interactivity, transaction and fulfilment. To improve the consumers' shopping experience, it is necessary that companies invest on a well-design website, easy to navigate and to provide the right level of interactivity (Chen, Chang, 2003). These web features also enhance the recreation aspects of online shopping. Likewise, Swinyard, Smith (2003) state that online shoppers are more entertainment-oriented, thus reinforcing the need to pay special attention to the interactivity and indulgency. According to Girard, Korgaonkar, Silverblatt (2003), convenience and recreational consumers' orientations relate positively to online shopping preferences, in what concerns experience goods, such as clothing or shoes. Therefore, convenience and recreation are extremely important factors regarding the motivations that drive consumers to shop experience goods online, namely shoes.

## ***2.2. Gender differences in online shopping: women motivations***

In the online shopping environment, men seem to be more likely than women to engage in buying activities and in purchasing more online (Kwak, Fox, Zinkhan, 2002; Rodgers, Harris, 2003). Although studies regarding gender differences in online shopping are somehow inconsistent (Chang, Cheung, Lai, 2005; Zhou, Dai, Zhang, 2007), Zhou et al. (2007) suggest that men tend to favour convenience over social contact, in opposition to women, which seem to be more motivated by emotional and social interaction. The social interaction and face-to-face communication that women seem to appreciate, is a constant in the online shopping context. In the same line, Dittmar et al. (2004) suggest that women's attitude suffers a considerably change when comparing the two environments: offline with online, having a less favourable attitude towards the second one. Men attitude's, on another hand, remain almost the same in both shopping atmospheres. Another interesting finding is that the preference for physically evaluate products seems to be a women's characteristic: they reveal a preference for seeing and feeling the products before buying them (Dittmar et al., 2004), especially when we are talking about products with high NFT.

Footwear can be considered as more than a simple means of foot protection, particularly women's footwear, which may be seen as a symbol of power and social status as well as of comfort and personal preferences (Seferin, Van Der Linden, 2012). Consequently, we can consider that the social interaction inherent to shopping and the NFT displayed in experience goods are both factors that highly impact women's predisposition to shop shoes offline. So, it's very important to understand how companies may deal these setbacks and enhance other features of the online context, so that they can overcome these limitations.

The following sections will focus on the above cited main factors that look like to influence women's predisposition to shop shoes online: convenience, recreation, NFT and social e-shopping.

### *Convenience*

Online shopping is claimed to be a time saving opportunity for consumers (Bellman, Lohse, Johnson, 1999). It reduces not only the travel time to the physical store, but also the time spent in lines (Donthu, Garcia, 1999). It eliminates the frustrations linked with the traditional shopping formats, such as fighting traffic, looking for parking space, and, at the same time, it eliminates the trouble of having to travel to a variety of stores (Childers, Carr, Peck, Carson, 2001). Closely related to the notion that online shopping is a time saver, is the convenience characteristic. Copeland (1923) first introduced this concept in the marketing literature in 1923, as an approach to classify goods - convenience, shopping, or specialty goods. Convenience is described as the minimization of the cognitive, physical and emotional activities that consumers must bear to purchase goods and services (Berry et al, 2002). So, when the barriers of undertaking an activity are reduced or eliminated, convenience occurs (Bell, Ho, Tang, 1998). Shopping convenience has been pointed as one of the main motivation regarding consumers' intention to shop online (Beauchamp, Ponder, 2010; Colwell, Aung, Kanetkar, Holden, 2008). It offers the consumers the opportunity to shop anytime and anywhere, giving them the chance to work and shop at the same time, saving a lot of valuable time. It also reduces the frustration associated with the shopping process by decreasing the psychological costs, which in turn makes the shopping experience more enjoyable (Childers et al., 2001). Given this, it is expected that convenience is a factor that influences women consumers' predisposition to shop shoes online.

### *Recreation*

Recreational consumer orientation relates positively to online shopping preferences concerning experience goods (Girard et al., 2003). The results of a research regarding online shopping orientation towards high NFT products, indicates that when people experience more enjoyment in their shopping activity, they are more likely to purchase the product online (Chen, Hung, 2015). Therefore, turning online shopping into a more interactive activity increases customers' recreational value and purchasing behaviour (Chen, Hung, 2015). Additionally, the interactive nature of websites has been recognised as a positive factor influencing consumers' responses, such as increasing the desire to browse and purchase online, proving to be crucial to foster hedonic pleasure (Gehrke, Turban, 1999; Mathwick, 2002; Fiore, Jin, 2003).

Some studies (Liu and Arnett, 2000; Koufaris, 2002) suggest that enjoyment influences the consumers' intention to return to a retailers' website and that it has a positive influence on consumer behaviour towards the e-retailers' website (Fiore et al., 2005; Jayawardhena and Wright, 2009). Hence, consumers' attitude regarding e-shopping seems to be positively influenced by enjoyment (Childers et al., 2001; Heijden, Verhagen, 2004). Once shopping is considered an enjoyable experience, consumers tend to concern less about the amount of time spent searching for product information or deals (Jensen, 2012). In consequence recreation is expected to be a factor that influences women's predisposition to shop shoes online.

### *Need-for-Touch (NFT)*

Even though online retailing is considered to be a very promising sector (Agardi, Dornyei, 2011), it still faces some limitations, such as the lack of sensorial elements, as scent or touch, which can have a strong influence on consumers' decision-making process (Weathers, Makienko, 2006; Grewal, Iyer, Levy, 2004; Dholakia, Zhao, 2010). NFT is described as "a preference for the extraction and utilization of information obtained through the haptic system" (Peck, Childers, 2003, p.431). The need to feel the product is prevalent in high-involvement product categories such as clothing or shoes, in which consumers need to see, try and touch the product to evaluate it (Workman, 2010).

Shoes can be considered "experience goods" which means that "full information on dominant attribute can only be known with direct experience and information search for such attribute is more difficult than direct product experience" (Chiang, Dholakia, 2003, p. 179). Thus, it is possible to say that consumer's intention to shop online is lower for experience goods than search goods (Chiang, Dholakia, 2003). This seems to be enhanced in the fashion environment, where consumer behaviour is considered a multi-sensory experience involving many senses, including the sense of touch (Workman, 2010; Rodrigues et al. 2017). Nevertheless, it has been argued that the profusion of information available online is reducing the gap between search and experience products (Huang, Lurie, Mitra, 2009) due to improvements in online shopping technologies, such as description and pictures (Rodrigues et al., 2017) or video clips. It is very important for companies to provide as much detail and variety of information to reduce the uncertainty that consumers have towards experience goods. Given this, it is expected that NFT represents a factor that negatively influences women's predisposition to shop shoes online.

### *Social E-shopping*

Shopping is a social activity that overcomes the simple act of obtaining products; it is about the whole experience, enjoyment and entertainment (Martineau, 1958; Tauber, 1972). Especially for women, shopping is considered a leisure and social activity (Miller, 1998). Dennis, Morgan, Wright and Jayawardhena (2010) suggest that e-retailers have a major opportunity to combine social networking with e-shopping, giving the fact that the internet is a new social context for many young women. Thus, social e-shopping can be a valuable strategy for e-retailers, especially for those whose main target is the female audience (Dennis et al., 2010)

Additionally, we can say that social networking has become a part of people's daily lives (Boyd, Ellison, 2007) and young females are overrepresented as users of social network sites (Social Networks, 2007). Lenhart and Madden (2007) report that 70% of young women use social network sites (SNS's). Moreover, DEI Worldwide (2008), informs that 60% of social network users are likely to pass along information they receive online and two-thirds of these users see online recommendations from other users as a credible source, representing a large influence on brand perceptions and possible on consumers' purchase decisions (Noori, Hashim, Yusof, 2016). Fashion brands know that blogs are a new marketing power (Hsu, Tsou, 2011; Ferreira, Silva, 2018) and are investing in this method as a communication-marketing tool that can be used as a form of user-generated content (Kulmala, Mesiranta, Tuominen, 2013). This way, brands establish collaboration with fashion bloggers. Bloggers provide sponsorship posts that try to captivate audience, considering that individuals lean towards following the suggestions

and references of bloggers they trust. Therefore, social SNS's and bloggers' influence will be explored as part of the social e-shopping factor. This factor can be considered as a factor that influences women's predisposition to shop shoes online.

Table 1 presents a systematization of the major factors influencing online shopping addresses in the literature reviewed and their findings.

Table 1. Major factors influencing online shopping

<b>Factors Studied</b>	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Major Findings</b>
Convenience, Product Type and Perceived Price	Chiang, Dholakia (2003)	Convenience and product type influence consumer intention to engage in online shopping.
Interactivity, Transaction and Fulfillment	Chen, Chang (2003)	Online shopping experience is found to be influenced by various factors related to interactivity, transaction, and fulfilment.
Price, Convenience, Recreation, Variety Seeking, Impulsiveness, Demographics & Product Categories	Girard, Korgaonkar, Silverblatt (2003)	Shopping orientations such as convenience and recreational shopper and demographic variables such as gender, education, and household income were significantly related to consumer's online purchase preference; Relationships of shopping orientation and demographic variables with purchase preference for shopping online significantly differ by product category - convenience and recreational orientations were positively related to preference for shopping online for experience good
Demographics, Computer Literacy and Use, Internet Lifestyles	Swinyard, Smith (2003)	Compared with online non-shoppers, online shoppers are younger, wealthier, better educated, have higher computer literacy, spend more time on their computer, spend more time on the Internet, find online shopping to be easier and more entertaining and are more fearful of financial loss from online shopping
Shopping convenience, Information Seeking, Immediate Possession, Social Interaction, Retail Shopping Experience, Variety Seeking	Rohm, Swaminathan (2004)	Four types of online shoppers: convenience shoppers, variety seekers, balanced buyers, and store-oriented shoppers.
Financial Risk, Product Risk, Convenience Risk, Non-delivery Risk, Return Policy, Service, Infrastructure Variables	Javadi, Dolatabadi, Nourbakhsh, Poursaeedi, Asadollahi (2012)	Financial risks and non-delivery risk negatively affected attitude toward online shopping; Attitude towards online shopping positively affects online shopping behaviour of consumers; E-retailers should make their website safer and assure customers for delivery of their products.
Privacy, Risk, Time, Convenience, Ease of Use, Vendor Reputation, Delivery Time and Cost, Product Quality and Variety, Product Returns	Raman (2014)	Convenience is considered the most important factor for female consumers to shop online; Risk of doing transactions, preference towards traditional shopping and reliability issues were the biggest setbacks.
Convenience, Recreation and Price	Chen, Hung (2015)	Males have higher convenience orientation than females; Recreation relates positively and price negatively to purchase behaviour; When people experience more enjoyment shopping, they are more likely to purchase online.

### Proposed Model

Based on literature review, we propose the following conceptual theoretical model that aims to portrait the factors driving women consumers to shop shoes online. This model will further explored during the interviews.

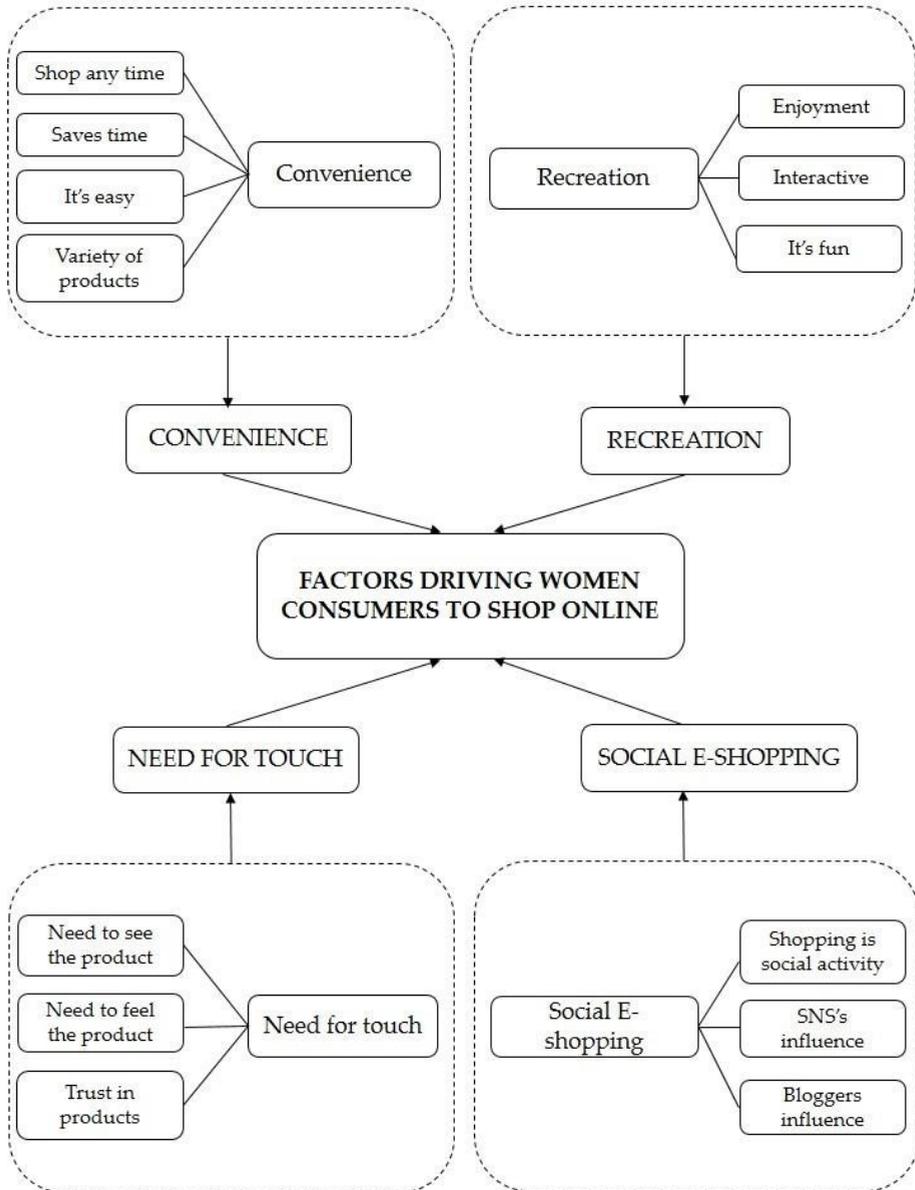


Figure 1. Conceptual model

### 3. Methodology

Research Scope and Data Collection a qualitative approach with twelve in-depth interviews (ten consumes and two managers of women’s shoes companies) was applied to analyse the dimensions proposed in the conceptual framework (Figure 1). Semi-structured interviews were conducted, each one lasting approximately 60 minutes, on the basis of a guideline previously developed. The semi-structured interviews ensure that the key issues of this study are addressed through a list of questions to explore and permit a certain level of flexibility by the presence of open-ended questions with the possibility to ask follow-up questions (Bryman, Bell 2015). The guideline contained a list of questions in a logical sequential order. The interviews to consumers were conducted to female individuals that have already bought shoes online. A brief description of each informant is provided to ensure the transparency and credibility (Table 2).

Table 2. Female Consumers Interviewed Profile

NAME	AGE	PROFESSION	NATIONALITY
Consumer 1	20	Student	British
Consumer 2	22	Planning Intern	Portuguese
Consumer 3	23	Journalist	Spanish
Consumer 4	23	Fundraising Intern	French-American
Consumer 5	23	Audit Analyst	Portuguese
Consumer 6	24	Medical Doctor	Portuguese
Consumer 7	24	Pharmaceutical Intern	Portuguese
Consumer 8	25	Digital Marketing	Portuguese
Consumer 9	26	Commercial Manager	Portuguese
Consumer 10	26	Sales Assistant	Portuguese
Producer 1	36	CEO of a Women Shoes brand	Portuguese
Consultant 1	52	Consultant of Woman Shoes brand	Portuguese

### 4. Research findings

#### 4.1. Factors Driving Women Consumers to Shop Shoes Online

The “convenience” factor was mentioned by all the ten participants as the main motivation to shop shoes online. Women consider that online shopping is easy and saves them time. They also appreciate the fact that they can shop at any

time and from any location, 24 hours a day. Another aspect mentioned was the wide variety of products available online and the possibility to find all the sizes and shoes' models they want, which are not, often, available at the physical stores.

"It's easy and convenient. When you already know the style and the size that fits you, online shopping saves you a trip to the store."

"It gives me the facility to see several stores in less time, it's 24 hours opened and I have the possibility to do all of this without leaving home. So it is more comfortable and convenient than going to a physical store."

"What I appreciate is the facility to see all the models and sizes that the physical store has, organized by sizes and types of shoes, without all the mess you see in real life. Also, I like the fact that I can buy them at home: that is very convenient and saves me a lot of time."

"It is easier to buy shoes online because usually there is more stock, so I can easily find my size. Moreover, I can have a better experience while shopping online because I can see the whole catalogue without going into the physical store, where sometimes the products can be sold out."

"Women are becoming busier everyday so it actually saves time not having to go to a suitable shop, park the car, try different sizes, and choose one that, at the end, may be sold out, and make you to return to the store (or another one) again."

It is noticeable how convenience is a crucial aspect that motivates women to shop shoes online. Additionally, the trouble of having to travel to a variety of stores is eliminated – they can check all the products they want from one single location. They also find online shopping to be an easy task, enhancing the convenience aspect, supporting previous findings regarding online shopping convenience (e.g. Donthu, Garcia, 1999; Childers et al. 2001).

### *Recreation*

Participants agreed that online shopping is a recreational activity. They found it to be a fun experience that provides enjoyable time. Some of the participants said that when they realised the website design to be more appealing, they tended to spend more time exploring it, searching for new products and consequently buying more.

"If you don't know the brand/size/how the shoes look and you don't mind because you are a risk taker as I am, then it's fun to shop and then see if shoes look good (as long as it's possible to return them, of course)."

"I love exploring websites looking for new shoe' models, especially when I enjoy its design, it's really exciting. I also like to read reviews from other customers, it gives me a better vision of the products I am buying."

"When I am surfing a webpage that has an interesting design and lot of cool features like photos or videos, I tend to forget about time and start to get lost in the whole online experience."

We can say that responses confirm the importance of the "recreation" construct proposed in the model. Sampled women find online shopping to be an enjoyable experience, stressing the relevance of the interactivity and design of the website. They appreciate retailers' websites with high quality images, charming features, solid descriptions of the products and an area for feedback and reviews from other customers. These outcomes are in line with the literature regarding recreational consumers' orientations (e.g. Girard et al., 2003; Fiore et al., 2005; Chen, Hung, 2015).

### *Need-for-touch*

All the participants agreed that touching and seeing the product was very important for them. Most of them mentioned that they were a bit concern with the fact that the shoe size might not be the right one, and the pictures might not correspond to the reality. Some referred that whenever they had the chance, they preferred to go the physical store and try the shoe first, and only then order it online.

“Online I don’t buy as impulsively as I do in-store because I don’t try the shoes and it is always risky to purchase something you do not see.”

“When we are talking about shoes, it is a bit complicated not to try them because the sizes change from one brand to another, so the best thing to do would be to try the shoes in real life.”

“You can’t really try the product, and sometimes is not like in the pictures, or it might not fit you properly, but usually this can be fixed with a good return system.”

“Not knowing how the product will fit or look like, without trying it, is always a concern, but that can be solved with returning it, which I consider as a safe way to act.”

The participants’ responses confirm that the NFT construct is a factor that influences their intention to purchase shoes online. Women tend to trust more products they touch, see and try. Even with all the pictures available at the retailers’ website, a lot of them go to the store first to try the product, especially to be sure of the size, and then order it comfortably and easily online. Providing high quality images, detailed information and descriptions can reduce the gap between the virtual and the real world. Likewise, some consumers mentioned the importance of a good product return system to overcome this setback. It is believed that product returns can lead to an opportunity for the online retailer to enhance customer loyalty and relationship (Raman, 2014). So, high-involvement and experience goods, tend to have a higher NFT characteristic that needs to be surpassed by online retailers (Workman, 2010).

### *Social E-shopping (SNS’s and Bloggers Influence)*

All interviewees confessed that they did spend a lot of time browsing through SNS’s (Facebook and Instagram were the ones most frequently mentioned) and that they also followed bloggers. However, many of them do not acknowledge the fact that this is a motivating factor that drives them to shop shoes online, specially the social network pages of the companies. Some admitted that, unconsciously, bloggers might influence their search for some products. But, they do not recognize the direct influence this factor has on their online shopping predisposition.

“I follow some bloggers on social media and what they wear tends to be similar to the style that I like. These bloggers also show where the product is available, how it looks like and which outfits will match that type of shoes. This gives me an extra motivation to buy. Nevertheless, I do not feel influenced by the pressure of SNSs.”

“Nowadays, I think that both social media and bloggers influence our buying decision. Most of the clothes they wear are available online, and it is tempting not to buy them as soon as we see someone wearing it and nailing it. It becomes almost like a mechanism of buying without the necessity of trying it, because someone already tried and proved us that it will work out. However, as for their Facebook page, I don’t think it increases my predisposition to buy in itself.”

“I spend a lot of time online, especially on Instagram, and I follow a lot of bloggers. Most of the time I click on the tags labelled in their photos and that redirects me to the brands’ pages, giving me the opportunity to search for different kinds of products.”

Interviewees admitted that social networking has become a part of their daily lives but they use it more as a social platform to express their individual beliefs and day-to-day moments with friends and family, rather than using it as a shopping lever.

“I don’t really like to share my shopping moments. I prefer to save it to myself.”

So, women consumers see SNS’s more as a communication platform for brands, than they see it as a factor motivating them to purchase online. They also recognised that bloggers are an inspiration for them and that seeing them wearing the shoes on and matching it with the whole outfit, influences them to buy products more impulsively. Thus, bloggers are a key factor for marketing strategies of e-retailers, especially for brands that sell fashion products online.

## **5. The Suppliers’ Overview: A Company’s Perspective**

To provide the suppliers’ perspective regarding the factors that drive women consumers to shop online, we will present two managers’ opinion over these factors and see how the shoes companies they work for, incorporate this information in their online strategy. Companies are both Portuguese digital-born brands of women shoes created less than ten years ago, and with more than 4,000 clients each. One manager stated that it was a natural step to start in the digital world:

“We are a company that works globally and sells to the entire world, so the online strategy was the most natural one to start and develop this business.”

The strategy that the company pursues started international from day one:

“As soon as you enter the online world, you’re selling to the entire world. It was just a matter of understanding the logistics of the business and turning this operational. There are very few countries where we haven’t sold to, but the most relevant markets we sell to are Portugal and USA.”

The brand expanded digitally through social media and influencers that provided credibility and quality. The brand follows a premium strategy because we wanted to be considered a top-quality brand associated to Portuguese shoes’ excellence. The luxury brand consultant interviewed stated:

“When we are talking about top quality, the price is not the decisive factor - that goes to the background. Some brand have a differentiated product in terms of quality, so it’s expected that the price is also differentiated.”

The brand first physical store opened on 2016 in NYC. They chose this location because USA is the brand largest market and the origin of the majority of their frequent clients. Also it is a very important market in the fashion business.

“Consumers do not buy strictly online or offline, so this was the natural next move of the brand. We want to be at the centre, where everything is happening and become a reference in the fashion world. It was all about the marketing strategy and the relationship we wanted to build with our customers.”

### *Convenience*

The ability to shop online represents convenience. It is possible to have access to higher diversity of products, which is especially appreciated by women. Women like exclusivity and online shopping enables them to buy a product that

probably other consumers cannot find in a near physical store. Additionally, they can buy products from all over the world, which makes them unique. In terms of convenience features that the e-retailers can offer, the easiness of search and comparison of products are not a priority for both brands researched in this study, since they consider that people do not buy their products because they are easy to search, but because they are involved with the product.

“We don’t even have a search bar. We always have a “storytelling” behind each product; consumers can navigate through special collections and find the products that way. We want people to understand our concept and enter into the brand. “

Regarding the variety of products available online, these brands act differently from mass manufacturers. Since their products are handmade and they work with optimized stocks. This way, they do not have all shoes’ sizes and models available to order immediately. On the consumers’ side, this might be a little disappointing, but on the companies’ perspective, this helps to manage the stock more efficiently. The interviewed made the following comments:

“We do not have all the products available; we work with optimized stock. We only have in warehouse the most frequently sold products since our products are all handmade. Sometimes clients have to wait a while to get the product delivered to their homes... But, if the client has already a relationship with the brand, that won’t be an obstacle. The time of delivery can go from 15 days to 3 months.”

“Our brand wants to be seen as an accessible luxury product with a premium market positioning. As so, scarcity creates more appetite for the product. Consumers have to wait longer for the product they want, but when they receive it, the pleasure is higher.”

### *Recreation*

Brands need to cultivate the brand desirability in people’s mind, so that consumers can understand the added value they are being offered. It’s imperative for these companies to involve the consumer with their brands and products. The website is the main tool of communication and interaction, so it needs to have an appealing design and interactive features like videos and images. Additionally, consumers value the opinion of peers, which improves their perception of trust towards the products.

“Our “storytelling” is told with videos that try to captivate the audience; we don’t have a lot of written descriptions. Our major recreational strategy is definitely the storytelling we put behind every product. Here we want to take the customer into a journey where she can understand where the products came from, who made it, which story is behind it.”

“Our website has a space for feedback and reviews from our customers, mostly derived from social media channels. We want to make sure that people know how customers felt about our products.”

### *NFT*

It has been massively argued that consumers feel the need to touch and see the products before buying them and that necessity tends to be higher in certain product categories. The sensorial elements are more relevant for fashion goods, where consumers have concerns regarding the mismatch between what they see virtually

and the real products. When brands have a physical store, it is common that the consumer goes the store to try the product and then orders it online. Some brands even encourage their customers to do that, while they are still at the physical store.

“We are aware of the fact that shoes have a high NFT and that people are afraid to order the wrong shoe size or that pictures don’t correspond to the reality, so we have a free return policy in Portugal and USA, and in other countries we charge a low fee.”

“Some brands send two or three pairs of shoes to their customers so they can choose the right one for them, but our brand can’t do that because our products are handmade and some are customized for that specific order. We know that the main factor causing NFT is definitely the size. We try to work with trusted sizes in order to minimize this problem.”

### *Social e-shopping*

On the companies’ perspective, this factor is closely linked with the recreational aspect. The product involvement is imperative and it can be highly improved through social networks and bloggers, reducing the gap between the virtual and the real worlds. Seeing day-to-day people wearing the products will improve trust. Therefore, social media and bloggers are key to overall marketing strategy.

“We are present in the main SNSs, but the most relevant ones are Instagram and Facebook, especially Instagram. Facebook has more relevance in Portugal than in other countries. Instagram is the social network that reflects better our brand image and it is mostly used by young women. We try to interact as much as we can with our customers through social media by replying to each comment or emailing; we have a 100% rate of replies.”

“The e-WOM around our brand is all organic. We have celebrities asking us to send them our products, but we do not do that unless we believe that person truly identifies with our values.”

“We do “gifting” and send the products to some celebrities that we believe will reflect our brand image. Bloggers and celebrities have millions of brands asking them to share their products, so sometimes it is hard to reach the ones we want. But when they really like our products, they share it organically.”

“We choose those bloggers or celebrities if we think they are a “Brand’s Woman”, the ones that believe in the women empowerment.”

“Our PR is in permanent contact with bloggers from all over the world; we want to create a customized relationship with them. We give them first hand news and share ideas.”

## **6. Conclusions**

### **6.1. Theoretical implications**

This research contributes for the understanding of the main factors that drive women to purchase shoes online, by fulfilling a gap in the literature regarding real insights from customers and managers on this topic. The main findings indicate that women highly appreciate the convenience feature that shopping shoes

online provides them. Convenience was found to be the key factor driving women consumers to shop online. Consumers value the easiness and time-saving aspect as well as the variety of products offered. The importance of the recreational attribute to stimulate online shopping was also confirmed in this research. Women interviewed stated that online shopping is a fun activity and that they enjoy the interactive features available online, such as the attractive website design, images and videos, reviews and feedback from other customers. This last factor provided them increased trust on the products they are buying, which is especially important in experience goods.

The NFT was considered a very important factor for all the consumers, mainly due to the size issue associated to the product category. NFT is particularly relevant in high-involvement product categories such as clothing or shoes, in which consumers need to see, try and touch the product to evaluate it, hands-on. Many of the participants said they preferred to go the physical store to try the product first and only then buy it online. Others said that this concern could be overcome with a good return policy.

Lastly, social e-shopping was found not to be as significant for women as it was supposed to be, considering the literature reviewed. Participants didn't acknowledge the direct impact of this factor on their predisposition to shop online. They acknowledge, though, having an active presence in the SNS's and they admit to follow bloggers and media influencers online. However, most of them do not consider this to be a motivating factor to purchase shoes online.

## **6.2. Managerial implications**

This study offers some interesting insights for shoes companies' marketers. The understanding of the main factors that stimulate women consumers to shop shoes online provides relevant cues to best target this audience online by using strategies that are aligned with their motivations. Additionally, providing two different overviews of these factors – demand and supply - creates additional value. The convenience aspect of online shopping is imperative for consumers and any brand that has an online presence is automatically providing this to their customers: an online presence automatically provides convenience. Online stores offer the possibility of having a 24 hour, 7 days a week shop available, which is not possible in the physical world. Also, online shopping comprises an infinite number of options (colours, sizes, etc.), all in one "place".

Consumers consider online shopping as a recreational activity that can be enhanced by certain features that online brands can offer. It is very important to have an appealing and interactive website design that simulates their audience, such as good quality videos and images, but also an area for customer's reviews and feedback. This helps consumers to trust the products they are buying. It is also very important that brands stimulate customers' attention by involving them with the products, namely by using the "storytelling" strategy.

NFT is determinant in shoes. Consumers have the necessity to touch and feel before buying products like shoes. This is mainly due to issues such as the right size and the comfort provided. Nevertheless, this matter can easily be overcome by a good return policy. Companies must have it very clearly explained in their websites so that the customers can be more secured about their purchases. Furthermore, a good return policy can be an opportunity to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Social e-shopping is an imperative for digital brands. Almost every consumer is present in, at least, one social networking site and they are constantly being exposed to brand' stimulus, even without acknowledging it. They follow their favourite celebrities or bloggers online and are unconsciously being highly influenced by them. On the companies' opinion, this factor is directly connected with the recreational factor. They need to stimulate the enjoyment side of online shopping at every stage of the shopping process and most times this starts on social media. This also helps companies to connect and build a stronger relationship with their customers. Therefore, companies must acknowledge the power of social media and develop an active presence in the SNSs to improve customer relationship and eventually increase sales.

### **6.3. Limitations and future research**

There are several research limitations that should be taken into consideration. First, on top of the factors selected to better understand the behaviour of online female customers of footwear, others could have been selected to provide a more complete framework of the factors that drive women's decisions. Factors like price, privacy, risk, delivery time and cost, product returns, product quality and variety, among others, could be added to the conceptual model used in this article. Secondly, the sample of this study is limited and non-random, which may skew the results. This way, conclusions needed to be confirmed with a larger sample and more diversified, namely in terms of ages. Regarding the company's perspective, more managers could have been interviewed to give other viewpoints of the organization and its strategy. Also, more companies could have been included in this study to give a more accurate overview of the suppliers' side. A final problem found, was the difficulty to find articles related with the online shoes market to better understand the implications this specific product characteristics have on consumers' motivations to shop online and on companies' motivations to sell them. Future research should consider a quantitative approach based on these results to further corroborate the findings and ensure its validity and credibility. We also suggest the model to be employed in other setting and the hypothesis to be developed in accordance with additional constructs.

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