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Shopping motivations of fashion subscription service consumers

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a surge in fashion companies providing a subscription model of shopping whereby consumers can get a curated box of fashion items delivered to them regularly. Despite the popularity, there is a lack of research on this topic. This study employed a qualitative approach to examine the motivations and benefits consumers associate with fashion subscription. Using in-depth interviews, data collected from 14 participants was analyzed to uncover six major themes. These themes are personalization via stylist and/or algorithm; adapting to the lifestyle: finding convenience and value; something old, something new, and something different: variety and experimentation; excitement of the surprise: searching for adventure; a gift for me: self-gratification; sharing the experience: shopping with friends and family. Themes uncovered from research with actual fashion subscribers have high external validity. Findings from this research advance our understanding on fashion subscription and provide insights for companies in this industry.

Keywords
Shopping motivations; fashion subscription; fashion retailing; stylist; personalization

Introduction

A business model gaining momentum in online apparel business is the subscription service model (Needleman 2012). A subscription service is an innovative way of product distribution that offers a range of benefits to fashion consumers (Needleman 2012; Yoshimura 2012). For a recurring fee, subscription companies deliver personalized boxes curated using algorithms and/or stylists' expertise. In the U.S. alone, more than 2,000 subscription box services in operation represent a diverse set of products (Shorr Packaging 2016). Popular companies within the apparel and beauty product categories include Birchbox, Menlo Club, Stitch Fix, Sprezzabox, Trunk Club, FabFitFun, The Zoe Report, and Le Tote. The unprecedented growth in online shopping explains the success of the subscription model. According to the Hitwise report, monthly visits to apparel and beauty subscription box sites have increased by 1,137% and 519%, respectively, from April 2014 to April 2018 (Fetto 2018). In addition, it reports 6.4 million U.S. visitors visited beauty/grooming box sites and 3.4 million U.S. visitors visited apparel/accessories box sites. As such, the number of fashion retailers adopting subscription models is fast growing with the retail

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format serving as the primary business (e.g. Birchbox) or an extension of an existing one (e.g. Trunk Club). Well-known retailers like Macy's, Amazon, Walmart, and Nordstrom have also included monthly subscription services in their portfolio of offerings.

The growing number of subscription box services, particularly in fashion, is at times attributed to the way these box companies operate. For example, Stitch Fix, an online subscription service for women's, men's and kid's apparel and accessories, and a well-known retailer in the fashion domain, can be a good example to understand the business model on how the multiple similar formatted subscription services operate. The style preferences that Stitch Fix collects from a subscriber at the time of subscription are captured in the Stitch Fix system, and using machine learning algorithms these preferences translate chunks of information that suggest a list of items that fit well into the subscribers' preferences. Once the algorithms work to reduce the entire merchandise Stitch Fix has to offer into a more manageable list of options for the specific subscriber, a human intervention comes into play in the form of a stylist to further condense the list. The stylist looks at preferences subscribers have selected and use their own judgment and past experiences to curate a box of items for the subscribers.

The rising number of fashion subscription services calls for an in-depth understanding of consumer motivations for using this retail format. While recent studies (e.g. Lee, Sadachar, and Manchiraju 2017; Mimoun, Garnier, and Depledt 2015; Ramkumar and Woo 2017; Tao and Xu 2018; Woo and Ramkumar 2018) have examined consumer's attitude toward subscription services and provided some insights into this topic, the coverage is narrow with select constructs probed. Although Ramkumar and Woo (2017) studied how shopping motivations influence consumers' attitude toward subscription services, these motivations were discussed within a general context of how subscription services operate. Furthermore, for several studies (Ramkumar and Woo 2017; Tao and Xu 2018; Woo and Ramkumar 2018), the external validity is limited as the research participants were not all subscribers. Given the limited number of studies, further research that offers a deeper understanding of consumer motivations related to fashion-related subscription services is timely.

Using qualitative data collected from subscribers' firsthand experience, this study conducts an holistic inquiry into subscription shopping motivations. Given the limited research on this phenomenon, qualitative research adds value with in-depth probing and examination. Applying the shopping motivation framework, this study seeks to explore the major motivations related to subscription shopping. This study serves to (a) advance conceptual understanding of subscription services by identifying prominent themes that capture consumers' motivations within the context of fashion subscription shopping and (b) offer critical insights into the dynamics of subscription consumption, which allow fashion-based subscription retailers to position their offerings in ways that resonate with consumers. The research question for this qualitative study is the following: *What are the major shopping motivations of subscriptions service consumers and how do fashion-based online subscription services satisfy their shopping motivations?*

Literature review

Subscription services

Traditional research on subscription services in the business literature has focused on the rational decision-making of consumers; the experiential aspect of consumption was largely ignored. Within the context of fashion product-related subscription services,

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recent studies point to hedonic and experiential benefits that go beyond rational decision-making. Mimoun, Garnier, and Depledt (2015) conducted a netnographic analysis of *My Little Box* (beauty box) subscribers' *YouTube* reviews and found that both intrinsic and extrinsic values influence consumers' decision-making. Tao and Xu (2018) used a nonsubscriber student sample to explore perceptions and attitudes toward fashion subscription retailing services. They summarize perceptions of benefits (opportunity to try new styles and brands, excitement of opening the box, time savings, as well as reduced impulse purchases) and risks (inability to opt out of the services, time-consuming interaction with the stylists, absence of social shopping and sales shopping) from these services. Similar findings suggest that quality of service and uniqueness are primary drivers of positive attitudes toward subscription box retailers (Lee, Sadachar, and Manchiraju 2017). Other drivers found in prior research include fashion consciousness (Ramkumar and Woo 2017; Woo and Ramkumar 2018), self-efficacy in online transactions (Ramkumar and Woo 2017), and trust in online transactions among females (Ramkumar and Woo 2017). Although these findings add to the research literature on consumer decision-making with respect to these services, an in-depth understanding of consumer motivations based on first-hand accounts and testimonials from fashion consumer subscribers would further add to the current limited literature on subscription services.

Shopping motivations

Consumer motivation offers a theoretical foundation for understanding perceived benefits related to subscription services. Motivation guides both attitude and behavior and predisposes people to respond in certain ways (Tauber 1972; Westbrook and Black 1985). Shopping motivation is the reason why people go shopping and relates back to the psychosocial needs of consumers that is beyond simple acquisition of the product (Tauber 1972). Motivation research is commonly framed within the context of the expected benefits of consumers (e.g. Arnold and Reynolds 2003). In turn, expected benefits are often based on past benefits and experiences that serve as the motivation or reasoning behind shopping. Past literature establishes the key role of motivations behind shopping (e.g. Arnold and Reynolds 2003; Babin, Darden, and Griffin 1994; Kim and Hong 2011; Rohm and Swaminathan 2004; Tauber 1972; Wagner 2007; Westbrook and Black 1985).

Arnold and Reynolds (2003) summarize the results of many shopping motivation studies and offer a detailed analysis of shopping motivations. They found that task-oriented utilitarian shopping motives also bring hedonic fulfillment as most shopping motivations do bring emotional satisfaction and enjoyment to consumers beyond 'a job accomplished'. Consumers derive enjoyment from the utilitarian aspects of shopping by offering practical benefits such as saving personal resources (e.g. Arnold and Reynolds 2003). Reviewing many of the major shopping motivation literature, Arnold and Reynolds (2003) describe motivational dimensions related to shopping such as seeking adventure and excitement, need to relieve oneself of stress and treat oneself, searching of new products and information that is not necessarily part of the purchasing process, enjoyment from shopping for and with friends and family, and the sense of achievement when finding value through sales and discounts. These motivational constructs are used as a framework to guide our research on what drives fashion subscribers to enroll in and continue with subscription services. With subscription services, convenience factors

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related to saving time and shopping efforts such as browsing through a range of offerings and narrowing down choice sets may be an obvious utilitarian benefit. But we argue that there might be more than just the utilitarian aspect that one goes through when enrolled with a fashion subscription service. For instance, consumers may be motivated by the prospect of variety of clothing that these services offer. Hence, a comprehensive inquiry into this topic must not neglect either of these two motivations. The research by Arnold and Reynolds (2003), though not on this topic, provides a good point of departure given that they consider a holistic framework of fashion shoppers' motivations. For example, these researchers uncover 'value shopping', which is a utilitarian motivation. On the other hand, motivations such as 'adventure shopping' and 'social shopping' uncovered by these researchers are instances of hedonic motivations. Accordingly, we maintain a broad focus on shopping motivations for fashion subscribers in order to facilitate a holistic inquiry into this subject.

In the more recent literature, shopping motivation dimensions have been highlighted within the context of technology enabled shopping (e.g. Bartl, Gouthier, and Lenker 2013; Childers et al. 2001; Hill, Beatty, and Walsh 2013; Sarkar 2011; Wagner, Schramm-Klein, and Steinmann 2017). For example, adventure motivation was commonly noted among active internet users and online shopping contexts (e.g. Hassouneh and Brengman 2014; Hill, Beatty, and Walsh 2013; Ono et al. 2012). Similarly, other studies have established that users go to the online environment to engage socially in interpersonal communication (e.g. Korgaonkar and Wolin 1999). Kukar-Kinney, Scheinbaum, and Schaefers (2016) give evidence that the internet offers compulsive buyers an environment to shop deals online for hedonic gratification, which in turn serves as a mechanism to cope with and reduce personal tension. Convenience, commonly described as savings in time and effort, continues to be identified as a significant motivating factor in online shopping contexts (e.g. Kumar and Kashyap 2018; Martínez-López et al. 2014; Parker and Wang 2016; Swaminathan, Lepkowska-White, and Rao 1999; Rohm and Swaminathan 2004). Tapping into the experiences of online consumer subscribers, the current research builds on past research by holistically examining these shopping motivations within the context of a relatively new business model. Qualitative research in which rich consumer experiences are explored broadens our understanding of fashion-related subscription services.

Method

A qualitative study using in-depth semi-structured interviews was used to capture rich consumer experiences. A holistic account of the experiences of active consumers of fashion-based subscription services enabled researchers to understand the various shopping motivations of consumer subscribers. This qualitative research method applied within the context of consumer subscription services is limited and the current study adds valuable information to the research literature. Participants in this study were current subscribers to one or more online fashion subscription box companies. Active subscribers can give a first-hand account of their personal motivations for using these services. The majority of participants were recruited through an open message on Facebook pages related to fashion-based subscription companies. Members of these Facebook pages receive regular updates or offers and interact with stylists and other followers on the social media platform. Subscribers who held membership for a minimum

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of 1 month and received at least one box were eligible for the study; the minimum subscription criteria were intended to capture a broad participant base. Researchers also solicited participation from referrals. Interested candidates who reached out to the researchers with no active subscription or those who had subscribed to grocery/home furnishing subscription services were denied participation since the study is focused on fashion subscription services. A total of 14 participants were recruited for the study: 11 from Facebook and 3 from participant and researcher referrals.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted (1 face-to-face and 13 phone interviews) between January and March 2018. Since all the participants were working professionals, the interviews were conducted over telephone for convenience. Each of the interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes and the interviews were recorded on a recording device. The interview protocol, which guided discussion topics, included (1) general shopping attitude and behavior (e.g. brand preferences, budget, product evaluation criteria, and style preferences), (2) motivations for using subscription services, (3) personal experience with subscription and (4) personal background information. Select questions allowed the researchers to better understand the personal context of the participants' shopping behavior or subscription interest. A $15.00 e-gift card was offered to participants as a token of appreciation for participating in the study. The data collection procedure with assurances of anonymity and confidentiality was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interview transcripts were coded using NVivo 11.0. A combination of both a priori and emergent coding processes were employed to analyze the transcripts and identify codes that evolved from the data. Twenty-five percent of the total transcripts were independently coded by two researchers as per the agreed coding guide. The inter-rater reliability was 98.4%. A constant comparison approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008) was employed to evaluate the data and find connections between the emerging concepts or themes to inductively explain the dynamics of subscription services.

Results and discussion

There are no specific guidelines for the required number of samples for qualitative studies (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Charmaz's (2006) saturation principle was used to collect data and determine the sample size. A summary of the 14 interview participants is presented in Table 1. Participants were highly educated (12 with graduate degrees), female (N = 12), an average of 45 years of age, and working professionals. Participants were subscribed to one or more of the 11 fashion-related subscription companies mentioned, which offer beauty, grooming, apparel and accessories product categories. The majority (10) of participants were either current or past subscribers to Stitch Fix. Participants were subscribed to a fashion-based subscription company for 3 months or more (average subscription time period was 20 months) with the last package received between 1 day to 4 months prior to the interview date. The major motivation themes found from data analysis (Table 2) highlight the importance of the stylist and its influential role in facilitating the consumption experience of the subscribers.

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Table 1. Participant profile.

Participant	Gender	Age (yrs)	Education	Occupation	Subscription History	Subscription Years	Subscription Service Products
Emily	Female	54	MBA	Faculty member	Birchbox	2 years	Beauty-related
Sarah	Female	42	Masters	Contract Manager	MM.LaFleur, Wantable, Stitch Fix, Le Tote	3 years	Clothing, Accessories
Jennifer	Female	48	Masters	Marketing Director	Birchbox, The Zoe Report	9 months	Accessories, Beauty-related
John	Male	52	Masters	Minister	Stitch Fix, Birchbox, Trunk Club	2 years	Clothing, Grooming-related
Steve	Male	34	Masters	Legal Editor	BirchboxMan, Sprezzabox	3 months	Grooming-related, Accessories
Katie	Female	31	Masters	Nurse Practitioner	Stitch Fix, Causebox, Datebox	1 year	Clothing and non-fashion
Michelle	Female	43	Masters	Teacher	Stitch Fix, Rocksbox	3 years	Clothing, accessories, jewelry
Megan	Female	32	Masters	Contractor	Stitch Fix	1.2 years	Clothing
Nicole	Female	49	Bachelors	Unemployed	Stitch Fix	1 year	Clothing
Elizabeth	Female	48	Some college	Manager	Birchbox, Dia & Co.	7 months	Beauty-related, Clothing
Amy	Female	50	Doctorate	Nursing professor	Stitch Fix	2 years	Clothing
Julia	Female	54	Masters	Corporate Financial Officer	Stitch Fix, Trunk Club, ThredUp	4 years	Clothing and accessories
Stephanie	Female	53	Masters	Manager	Stitch Fix	2 years	Clothing
Maria	Female	36	Masters	Environmental Engineer	Le Tote, Stitch Fix, Trunk Club	1.8 years	Clothing

Note. Pseudonyms were used to refer to participants.

Personalization via stylist and/or algorithm

The stylist/curator serves an important role in adding value to the subscription experience. Subscribers are gratified by the fact that a stylist/curator thoughtfully styles their box based on their preferences and delivers it to their home. Communication between the subscriber and stylist is an ongoing process further enhanced in part by social media, product feedback forms, e-mails, etc. that lead to a more satisfying experience as described by over a quarter of participants. The majority of participants were Stitch Fix subscribers, and we note that their subscription box experiences cannot be separated from their experiences with their stylists. The style questionnaire, Pinterest boards and an ongoing subscriber commentary of the box items allow the stylist to understand subscriber's preferences. Michelle discusses the rapport she built with her stylist.

> Today I got an email that said, do you have something to tell your stylist because your Stitch Fix box is about to be styled. So, you can go in and you can write a note to your stylist [. . .] to show things that you like, you can link that in with your Stitch Fix profile and then your stylist can check out your Pinterest board and then they can see some examples of things that you might like. I had a stylist that I worked with for 3 years [. . .] over that time, you develop a relationship [. . .] I write notes and she writes notes back - you know like answer things in your note or explain why they sent you different things. So, that worked really well for me. And I was at a point where I was pretty much keeping all 5 items or 4 out of 5 items, almost all of the time. (Michelle)

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Table 2. Summary of findings and comparison with past research studies.

Themes	Description	Past research studies
Personalization via Stylist and/or algorithm	Findings suggest that, in addition to algorithms, stylist play a crucial role in ensuring that the box items are liked by the subscribers, thus increasing their retention value.	Tao and Xu (2018) explored the limited role of a stylist and defined their presence as time-consuming.
Adapting to the lifestyle: Finding Convenience and Value	Ease of receiving a box within the comfort of home saves subscribers' time, efforts, and costs as well as offers lucrative discounts, thus increasing the value aspect of the box service.	Ramkumar and Woo (2017) and Tao and Xu (2018) explored the convenience aspect of subscription services.
Something Old, Something New, and Something Different: Variety and Experimentation	Findings suggest that stylists help subscribers to experiment with their personal style while also keeping them attuned with the latest trends in fashion.	Tao and Xu (2018) predicted the opportunity to trying new styles and brands as an important subscription benefit while Woo and Ramkumar (2018) missed to factor in the role of a stylist while predicting the consumer's usage of subscription services based on product acquisition.
Excitement of the Surprise: Searching for Adventure	Terms like 'thrill', 'fun', 'excitement', 'surprise' emphasize the feelings subscribers go through when learning about their box arrival.	Tao and Xu (2018) predicted excitement of opening to the box while Lee, Sadachar, and Manchiraju (2017) deduced product surprise as one of the insignificant predictors in predicting consumers' attitudes toward subscription services
A Gift for Me: Self-Gratification	Rewarding or treating oneself with a 'gift' of box even though they paid for it, was found to be an important motivation that subscribers described during the interview study.	No past research exploring this dimension.
Sharing the Experience: Shopping with Friends and Family	Findings suggest that subscription services acted as a strong catalyst in encouraging conversations, particularly on social media platforms.	Tao and Xu (2018) study predicted that subscription services might limit the social interactions among shoppers. While Lee, Sadachar, and Manchiraju (2017) found WOM as an important factor in confirming subscribers' satisfaction with their subscription services.

John mentioned the challenges of working with different stylists as well as their appreciation when they are happy with their stylist.

> I kept the whole entire box for the first time. I was very impressed [. . .] But then all of a sudden, my stylist changed, I noticed, and the one box they sent me I returned the whole box. It was totally not my style, I felt like they didn't know who I was and then I realized that this was a different stylist [. . .] I almost dropped the box, like I did not want to do it anymore. (John)

> I'm on the community board of Facebook where people were like unhappy with their stylists and I felt like, wow, this is like good, that I feel like my stylist is listening to me [. . .] I kind of felt like, oh wow, I got a gem here in Julia (stylist). (Katie)

Companies also take the initiative to rematch stylists with subscribers. Megan was initially receiving boxes with items of which she sent most of them back. Megan feels her new stylist understands her style, which helps Megan have a higher product retention rate. Some subscribers tend to be more experimental and use the stylist-subscriber

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relationship work to their advantage. This study's findings that specifically point to the important role of the stylist/curator to the consumer's shopping experience are not highlighted in previous subscription studies; past studies focus on various predictors of subscription service enrollment but do not address the role of the stylist/curator as critical drivers of the subscription format (e.g. Tao and Xu 2018; Lee, Sadachar, and Manchiraju 2017; Ramkumar and Woo 2017; Woo and Ramkumar 2018). In fact, Tao and Xu's (2018) study with student nonsubscribers predicted that the presence of stylist would make the shopping experience more time-consuming. The following themes show the importance of curated boxes that enhances the subscriber's shopping experience and describe the motivations and benefits for subscription shopping.

Adapting to the lifestyle: finding convenience and value

The aspect of convenience, time savings, and cost savings motivates subscribers to enroll in or to continue with the subscription services. In general, the ease of receiving a box of items delivered at home satisfies the convenience shopping motive of the subscriber. These findings concur with earlier studies (Tao and Xu 2018; Ramkumar and Woo 2017). All (14) the participants indicated that their work and lifestyle influenced their need for convenience and saving time and effort in shopping. Amy mentioned she enjoyed shopping as a young female but now she is busier with her work and can no longer afford to spend hours in a mall. Jennifer mentioned that easy shipping and return policies are useful for a professional and busy mother like her. As such, almost all the participants considered subscribing to these services as a pragmatic solution to their changing lifestyles. They noted the convenience of receiving a box of select items and not having to browse over multiple choices, while shopping in online or offline stores. Subscription shopping reduces the choice overload that consumers face and provides a more suitable and manageable set of items to consider. This saves their time and effort that are otherwise put into the shopping process. Katie mentions the following:

> I would much prefer having someone do the hard work for me, picking it out from all the millions of options they have instead of me going to the store and trying to decide on what might look good. (Katie)

Promotional offers and discounts motivate shoppers to shop through any retail channel (Lee and Overby 2004) and subscription services are not an exception. In addition, it encourages the subscribers to engage word-of-mouth with their friends and family in return for credit to their account or a free box of items. Two participants were referred by their friends to join subscription services that offer exciting deals to both the referrals and the new subscribers. For Michelle, receiving a free box the first month (within the referral system) was the reason to subscribe to Rocksbox. Most of the services waive the styling fee if a subscriber buys at least one item from the box received. Half of the participants (7) reported keeping at least one item from a box to take advantage of this offer. Moreover, the services follow a 'the more you keep the cheaper it is' strategy by offering a discount to the subscribers if they keep the entire box. Meghan expressed how the 'lure of the discount' has prompted her to buy more from her subscription service compared to what she would have purchased in a store and making the other pieces 'work' to get the discount. The stylist's efforts are most recognized by the subscribers when the consumer

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buys more. By curating a box specific to the needs and preferences of the subscribers, the stylist helps the subscribers (e.g. Megan) keep the entire box and receive the discount. Also, a professionally curated box can make a subscriber want to hold on to the items more as they feel like giving it a chance (e.g. Sarah). Although the above-mentioned promotional offers and discounts motivate participants to enroll in these services, it is the stylist/curator who constantly delivers high-value retainable products that keeps participants satisfied. Hence, the stylist/curator helps a subscriber take full advantage of the various deals and discounts offered by their subscription service.

Consumers mention the favorable value of the subscription service related to its costs versus benefits. Jennifer does not mind spending a little more on her purchases given the value of the services offered. John feels his subscription plans are 'worth investing' as they provide him with items difficult to find at a local store. For subscription services that do not involve a stylist in the process, participants subscribed and continued with the service as they found value in their low subscription fees and the variety of items offered. Two subscribers with lower subscription fees for brands such as Birchbox and Rocksbox describe their subscription plans as being of 'very little risk' (Emily) and note there 'is not much skin in the game' (Michelle). The following themes also add to the consumer perceptions of the added value of the subscription service.

Something old, something new and something different: variety and experimentation

Two themes tap into the shopping motivations of searching for variety and experimenting with personal style. Many shoppers search for a diverse range of products while considering how the box items look with their existing wardrobe and are open to trying on different styles that differ from their current style. Eight participants described how subscription services provide access to new materials, styles and look from many known and unknown brands. Katie feels that her stylist selects items she might not have given a second look if shopping by herself, but because it comes to her house, she tries it on, and usually, she ends up liking it and expands her wardrobe. Likewise, Maria does a 'little idea shopping' with her rental subscription, Le Tote, since she gets new options to try, 'I feel like I have a fairly set style and that's one of the things I like about the subscription services. Le Tote in particular it kind of lets me try some things without the risk'.

Subscribers also spoke about trying on items from the boxes with their already-existing wardrobe. Style cards that their stylist puts in each box show a subscriber how to wear items. Julia, a subscriber to Stitch Fix and Trunk Club, has a corkboard in her office that is full of Stitch Fix style cards. At times, she writes notes to her stylist to send her pieces that match up with clothes from her past purchases. A subscriber's interest in fashion and a mix-and-match ability helps them to make the most of the stylists' services. Subscription services help participants refine their style or allow them to think out-of-the-box. Even with more conservative shoppers who generally opted for the same kind of clothes when shopping by themselves, subscription services opened new options to explore offering as an added benefit.

Subscription services allow subscribers to stay abreast of the current fashion trends. Subscription companies satisfy a subscriber motivated by variety and idea shopping by providing access to new styles, outfit ideas, and a variety of options for specific occasions.

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The opportunity of trying new styles and brands via subscription services was perceived by student nonsubscribers as the most important subscription benefit by Tao and Xu (2018). Although a box limits the number of items introduced (which is otherwise not limited when shopping through other channels), the stylist/algorithm refines the choices to best suit the subscriber's preferences (e.g. Stitch Fix, Rocksbox). This reduces the choice overload, which negatively impacts the shopper while making a purchase decision (Kahn, Weingarten, and Townsend 2013). Further, with the help of the 'style cards' put together by the stylists, the subscribers get outfit ideas to explore the compatibility of the items in the box with those in their existing wardrobe.

Subscribers are also encouraged to explore their experimental side through delivered items. Subscribers tend to get surprised by how an item looks on him/her and are given opportunities to adapt to different styles and looks that otherwise they would not select when shopping by themselves (e.g. Megan, Julia).

> And I would look at the thing and, there is no way this is gonna look good on me. And they send it and I try it on and I am like, oh my gosh, this is so cute. And so, I feel like Stitch Fix has helped me get out of a 'style rut' [. . .] that's what's been exciting for me from Stitch Fix is they have got me to try colors I would never pick off the shelf, and styles I would never pick for myself. And that's been fantastic. That's been very helpful to me. (Julia)

While Megan compared how her experience with the subscription service is different from the traditional online shopping 'where somebody is trying to style you'. When she wants to experiment with her style, Megan prefers subscription services over the traditional online shopping as the latter makes her 'kind of sticking with your same style, so it isn't making you try anything new. So, I think, the benefit is also trying something new.'

Experimenting with style required some encouragement by the styling experts in case of more personalized services like Trunk Club, Stitch Fix, and MM. LaFleur. This may partially explain the findings by Woo and Ramkumar (2018) which report exploratory product acquisition does not predict consumers' usage of subscription services since it failed to factor in the role of a stylist in the equation. In contrast, our study found that the stylists helped subscribers think out of the box and expand their wardrobe with innovative styles. Elizabeth discusses that Dia & Co. helps her try new styles by sending a box of clothes that she would not consider and how she is pleasantly surprised that she likes it.

> I like getting a box of maybe something that I wouldn't normally pick up in a store to look at that might push the envelope on my style, I also like that the brands that they send are not generally brands that I find in my local stores [. . .] I will look at one piece that they put in it and thought, that is the ugliest thing I have ever seen in my life (laughs). But then I will try it on and I will, like, oh you know well, that looks pretty good (laughs). (Elizabeth)

Jennifer would have never bought herself metallic and shiny accessories if it was not for her latest Zoe box. She shares 'but it's kind of fun to have [. . .] I'll find an excuse to wear it at some point, I am sure'. In addition, subscribers described their subscription as 'something new and fresh' (Sarah) and 'always something different' (Emily).

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Excitement of the surprise: searching for adventure

Within the context of fashion subscription services, a strong experiential aspect of adventure shopping was mentioned by almost all participants. Motivated by adventure shopping, subscribers looked forward to the exciting and enjoyable experience of being surprised by the curated box. For some subscriptions, e-mails will follow about pending deliveries with options to replace the box contents, 'I have a box coming Friday [. . .] I'm in like a stalker mode, because it's coming. And I get quite excited' (Nicole). Elizabeth says, 'I get excited when I see it, or I get the email that says it's coming' and adds that she loves seeing her Dia box on the porch. For Sarah, it's almost an 'anticipation like receiving Christmas presents, something new, it's something fresh, and it's being delivered to you'.

Subscribers are delighted to open the box, similar to opening a Christmas present. As noted by Amy, the surprise element keeps the shopping process fun and serves as a motivation to continue with the service. Amy looks forward to being surprised and excited by the box items and trying them on to see whether she likes them.

> 'Fun' is the word that I keep using but, it is an enjoyable experience, I guess. And I think a lot of that is the element of surprise you know [. . .] But yeah, it's just kind of a fun thing and to be able to try things on and see what you look like and that type of thing. It's just an enjoyable experience. (Amy)

Subscribers will also intentionally allow the anticipation to build. Megan and Nicole mentioned that although they are aware about the notification feature and know that their next box is scheduled to be shipped, they tried to refrain from using the peek-and-see option in Stitch Fix. Megan wants to keep the excitement and anticipation intact until the time the 'big box' arrives at her doorstep, and she opens it. The reason she subscribed to the service was that she was fascinated by the mere fact that someone else (stylist) will style her box based on her needs and preferences while also allowing her to build in that excitement of 'what are you going to get, what are you going to try?'

These results differ from Lee, Sadachar, and Manchiraju (2017) that shows product surprise as an insignificant predictor of consumers' attitude towards subscription companies but confirms Tao and Xu (2018) focus group study of student nonsubscribers who expected the excitement of opening the box. The excitement of the surprise is a strong experiential motivation that explains the unique dynamics of fashion subscription services. Also, many of the subscribers acknowledge the 'fun' aspect of fashion subscription shopping framed as an experience from the box delivery. This form of entertainment transforms the experience to a 'treat', shared entertainment and new product stimulation and experimentation. The current study relates to Vanhamme and Snelders (2003) finding in that affective emotions of surprise and delight enhance customer satisfaction.

A gift for me: self-gratification

Receiving a box of personally curated items gives subscribers a sense of luxury and is perceived by subscribers as a major benefit of subscription. Over three-quarters (10 participants) of the subscribers commonly expressed emotions of self-gratification in which they

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were rewarding or bringing happiness to themselves. Sarah describes her subscription service as a luxury without the high prices. Emily notes that her subscription shopping is solely for her own pleasure, in which the experience as akin to receiving a gift or a treat.

> I see it as kind of my little gift to me from me [. . .] I don't tend to spend a lot of money on myself for various reasons but that's my one little thing that I get [. . .] so, it's just me I don't have to share it with my sons (laughs). (Emily)

Many subscribers enjoyed shopping and in general described it as a 'retail therapy'. However, Elizabeth notes that subscription services do not replace the in-store shopping experience.

> If I have a really bad day, really bad morning, to me there is nothing better than going to the mall and doing a little sale shopping (laughs). Receiving a box on the front porch is not the same thing. Not even close. (Elizabeth)

Self-gratification is another shopping motivation that is not captured in previous studies of fashion subscription services. As the 'surprise' aspect of the subscription service is connected to receiving an unexpected gift, the feelings related to treating oneself or receiving a gift may be directly related to the feelings of being delighted by the surprise. A subscriber's emotional experience appeared to be deeply personal as they are the focus of box deliveries.

Sharing the experience: shopping with friends and family

For many subscribers, there is strong evidence of subscription retail serving as a catalyst for social interaction. All the participants shared accounts of how subscription services promoted their social shopping behavior by sharing their experiences with friends, family, coworkers, and stylists and engaging in social media to seek or give advice about the subscription services and products. The topic of subscription services is easily brought into many casual conversations (e.g. Stephanie, Nicole, John). Michelle recollected an incident where she met a woman on the street who exclaimed 'Hey, I like your Stitch Fix shirt!' Michelle added that some of the outfits Stitch Fix sends are recognizable, which allows people to easily spot them and start a conversation. Nicole is very expressive about her Stitch Fix experience with friends and shares it with her neighbor.

> So, I definitely tell all of my friends. My friends are tired of hearing about Stitch Fix from me (laughs). I'm constantly talking about what I got. I have one friend who comes down from up the street when I get my box to see what I got (laughs). (Nicole)

Subscribers are also socially interactive within online media (e.g. Facebook, Pinterest, and blogs) and discuss their experiences with friends or online group members. Julia began her Stitch Fix plan 4 years ago when a blogger shared the pieces from the subscription service. Subscribers enjoy sharing their items online and the experience. Subscribers also buy and sell items through an unofficial Facebook page for subscribers.

> And I think it's just really fun to be part of the Stitch Fix groups that I really like and seeing what other people get in their boxes and then, being able to show things that I have gotten. Or again, seeing things that other people have gotten and then thinking, oh, I want to get that too [. . .] it has that social aspect built into it. (Michelle)

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Contrary to the finding by Tao and Xu (2018), this research offers clear evidence that the subscription service generates 'buzz' among subscribers and that the shared experiences stimulate social interaction at various levels. In addition to sharing their box experiences with family, friends, and co-workers, subscribers find ways to incorporate their social needs in relation to subscription shopping by joining online groups dedicated to subscription services. Professional social media agents, such as bloggers, also appear to be effective promoters of subscription services. Further, social interaction is promoted with stylists, which is a strong aspect of relationship building that is crucial for the subscription business model. As much as box deliveries are personal, word-of-mouth is an important aspect of subscription shopping and reaffirms subscriber satisfaction with the subscription-based service (Lee, Sadachar, and Manchiraju 2017). Finally, two participants mentioned receiving a present from their spouse or family members (Jennifer, John); this is considered as an extension of social shopping and sharing the subscription experience as subscriptions are curated individually and friends and family members can gift the shopping experience.

Conclusion

This research examined a growing innovative retail format in fashion subscription services. A personalized bundle of fashion items delivered to the home, which subscribers open like a present, offers a new experiential way to shop. This growing business model with personal shopping creatively leverages the growing technology and supports consumers' online shopping at a vastly different level. It is a new concept of fashion retailing introduced to the mass market. Research regarding this retail format is still nascent with a few early studies examining consumers' perceptions of this online retail model (e.g. Mimoun, Garnier, and Depledt 2015; Tao and Xu 2018; Lee, Sadachar, and Manchiraju 2017; Ramkumar and Woo 2017). Through qualitative analysis of subscriber interviews, the current study offers a conceptual framework related to shopping motivations and accompanying rich descriptions of how subscribers experientially perceive subscription services. This study offers evidence of how the newest mass retail business model is competitively differentiating itself in the crowded retail landscape.

Using subscriber interview data, this study identifies significant components of the subscription shopping experience: (a) personalization via stylist/algorithm, (b) convenience and value, (c) variety and experimentation, (d) excitement of the surprise, (e) self-gratification, and (f) sharing the experience. Although convenience and value from receiving clothes at the doorstep seem to be big motivations for consumers, the involvement of a stylist in the curation process is instrumental in providing the subscribers with the best mix of items. The prospect of trying new styles and variety, which the subscribers would not have tried if shopping by themselves, also elevates the subscribers' subscription shopping experience. Likewise, the element of surprise, which is unique to this model, brings fun and excitement to their shopping experience. This unique proposition, facilitated by a stylist or an algorithm, helps subscribers to continue with their subscription services. The majority of participants are gratified on seeing the box curated by their stylists and describe it as a 'gift' or a 'treat' for themselves. The curation of the box by the

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stylist/curator attaches an element of personalization to the entire subscription experience and serves as a key benefit for subscribers. Finally, sharing the subscription experience with friends/family is exciting to subscribers.

This study fills a void in the literature related to the motivations of subscription shoppers by holistically examining their actual experience with fashion subscription services. This study examines a new business model that leverages personalization of services and digital access and enhances the consumer shopping experiences. Through personalization, fashion subscription services enhance the experiential experiences of consumers in a way that differs from traditional shopping where consumers shop the marketplace via brick-and-mortar and online. For example, enthusiastic consumers share excitement over the delivery of their boxes and the anticipation of opening the 'surprise' that awaits them. Also, in addition to algorithms used by businesses, consumers use social media and technology applications to communicate with their stylists. Contrary to the intuitive belief that shopping online may be an independent and solitary activity, subscribers show active social interaction centered around their subscription boxes with other subscribers online and friends and family offline. As such, this study builds on previous studies (e.g. Arnold and Reynolds 2003) offering new insight into how subscription services satisfy the shopping motivations of consumers. Qualitative data collected from this study clearly show personalization services to be important in creating the experiential aspect of shopping that feeds the motivation of subscription shoppers. Clearly, subscription service business, with their retail format, enhances the shopping experiences of consumers.

The rich experiences of subscription consumers documented in this study offer insight into best practices for subscription business models. Our research shows the importance of personalization and stylists in a subscription company's ability to offer curated boxes that personally satisfy the needs of subscribers. Companies can gather consumer feedback and input by effectively leveraging digital communication and social media. Making efficient the flow of information from the consumer to the stylist, strengthening the company's ability to target the needs of the consumer with qualified stylists and a wide assortment of products and offering consumers a low-risk shopping environment are important. Communication among subscribers through Facebook pages, where consumers 'showcase' and resell their boxes, already offers a dynamic marketplace environment that further leverages the digital capabilities of the marketplace. As such, subscription companies can creatively differentiate their business in ways that are unique to the digital space and profit on a growing business model.

For future research, perceptions of participants with no subscription experience can be of value as non-subscriber consumers make up a larger share of the market and may offer information on how practitioners can tap into a potential consumer base. A detailed study into how the stylists, who play a crucial role in increasing the retention of box items, are recruited by the companies and what training is given to them to ensure strengthening the subscriber–stylist relationship could also be beneficial. Further, given the qualitative nature of this study, an in-depth interview method was used to understand participants' shopping characteristics in general as well as those related to subscription services. A quantitative study with a larger sample of consumers can be employed to test the study's conceptual model for subscription services to strengthen its generalizability. Future research should focus on identifying and

validating causal relationships between the constructs that reflect the themes uncovered in this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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