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USER-GENERATED FASHION VISUALS AS INFORMAL INFOGRAPHICS: and Emotional Engagement in Generations Y and Z

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how user-generated digital fashion visuals function as informal infographics that shape the cognitive and emotional engagement—and purchasing behaviour—of Generations Y and Z. Using the AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action), it tracks the consumer journey from social media to brand platforms and identifies six key interpretive dimensions. It introduces the concept of informal infographic—non-standardized, often user-generated visuals that clarify complex information. Through a mixed-methods design (survey n = 121; interviews n = 8), findings show that clarity, realism, and context enhance emotional and cognitive engagement. The main contribution is expanding infographic theory to include user-generated fashion content as epistemic tools in e-commerce.

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1. Introduction

Recent studies show that Generations Y (Millennials, born 1981–1996) and Z (born 1997–2012) increasingly experience *interpretive friction* when engaging with digital fashion visuals (Marwan et al., 2024; Navarro-Beltrá et al., 2020). Although stylized product images attract attention, they often fail to convey key information such as fit, material, or context. This paradox—visual saturation with low interpretive clarity—undermines usability in fashion e-commerce. Similar tensions are explored by Sánchez Serrano et al. (2022), who show how activist advertising relies on visual storytelling to reduce interpretive gaps and foster emotional and cognitive engagement through socially charged narratives. As Frascara (2000) emphasizes, visuals must clarify, not just seduce, while Albers (2015) insists that effective visual communication depends on structuring information for comprehension.

Faced with such limitations, consumers turn to social media not only for inspiration, but for orientation, using user-generated visuals that clarify what brand images often leave ambiguous. This shift reframes digital fashion visuals—not merely as aesthetic content—but as cognitive tools that support decision-making. In this context, fashion visuals—particularly user-generated content (UGC)—can function as informal infographics: non-standardized visuals that structure and communicate information in ways similar to journalistic infographics (Monte-Rojas et al., 2020; Ruiz, 2020).

Although brands invest in visually compelling imagery, they frequently fail to provide semantic clarity (Elías-Zambrano & Jiménez-Marín, 2024). Stylized visuals can obscure meaning, reinforcing visual asymmetries that limit understanding (Mirzoeff, 2015; Rodríguez-Blanco, 2022). Representation is thus not neutral; it configures access, participation, and comprehension (Bolinska, 2016; Rancière, 2004).

The informal infographic—in formats such as try-ons or styling reels—emerges as a visual narrative that reduces cognitive load and supports decision-making (Pérez-Seijo y Vizoso, 2021; Reinhardt, 2010). Grounded in theories of infographic design (Albers, 2015), visual semiotics (Checa Godoy & Garrido-Lora, 2017), and design for comprehension (Frascara, 2000), this approach calls for a shift toward visuals that prioritize clarity, diversity, and epistemic justice—understood as equitable interpretive access in fashion communication (D'Ignazio y Klein, 2020; Fricker, 2007).

Several empirical studies in digital fashion communication confirm that visual clarity, contextual representation, and user-generated content significantly influence cognitive processing, trust, and purchase behaviour. Vázquez et al. (2021), for example, found that user-generated visuals elicit aesthetic, emotional, and interactive responses that directly affect purchase intention. Marwan et al. (2024) demonstrated that visual marketing, especially in user-driven formats, influences purchase behaviour through emotional resonance and trust mechanisms. Navarro-Beltrá et al. (2020) found that Generation Z's buying decisions are significantly affected by perceived usefulness and trust in social media content. Huang et al. (2024), using a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), further confirmed that visual marketing is a decisive factor in fast fashion consumer behaviour, reinforcing the claim that images carry functional—rather than merely decorative—weight in decision-making processes.

By framing user-generated visuals as narrative infographics, this study expands infographic theory beyond traditional domains such as media, advertising, or fine arts (Rose, 2016). The study proposes six interpretive dimensions that structure its analytical lens. These dimensions synthesize how users assess the epistemic and affective potential of fashion visuals:

(1) Visual clarity and contextualization – building on Albers (2015) and Monte-Rojas et al. (2020), this dimension examines how image design influences interpretability and informational completeness.

(2) Social media as a distributed system of visual interpretation – exploring Ruiz's (2020) insights on non-traditional infographic environments and the role of social platforms as cognitive extensions.

(3) Stylistic friction vs. semantic access – following Frascara (2000), this axis assesses how visual over-stylization can hinder product comprehension.

(4) Emotion and relatability in visual evaluation – drawing on Reinhardt (2010), this dimension analyzes how emotional resonance and perceived authenticity contribute to engagement and trust.

(5) Perceptual segmentation – informed by Pérez-Seijo and Vizoso (2021), this component discusses how demographic variables shape visual decoding.

(6) Visual diversity as epistemic access infrastructure – drawing on Werenowska & Jaska (2025), this dimension argues that user-generated visuals not only enhance experiential engagement but also foster trust and interpretive clarity through authentic and diverse representations.

These six dimensions provide an analytical framework for interpreting data. They also serve to evaluate the extent to which digital fashion visuals—particularly in user-generated formats—function as effective hybrid infographic systems.

To analyze this phenomenon, the study employs the AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) as a cognitive-affective framework. Traditionally used in marketing to describe the stages of consumer engagement (Rawal, 2013; Strong, 1925), AIDA has evolved into a heuristic model applicable to digital and visual environments (Barry y Howard, 1990; Clow y Baack, 2016). In fashion e-commerce, especially for Generations Y and Z, AIDA offers insight into how different visual formats guide consumers from initial attention to final action.

The model is not used here as a fixed marketing formula, but as a flexible analytical lens rooted in theories of visual communication and information design. It allows for the interpretation of diverse visual formats—emotional, contextual, technical, testimonial—in terms of their capacity to attract, engage, and persuade through affective and cognitive mechanisms (Albers, 2015; Frascara, 2000).

Integrating AIDA with visual semiotics and design theory, the study argues that fashion visuals operate as epistemic infrastructures—media that do more than persuade; they enable knowledge, foster trust, and structure decision-making processes in digital environments (Werenowska & Jaska, 2025).

To bridge theory and empirical findings, the study presents Table 1, which links six interpretive dimensions with typical visual formats and corresponding AIDA stages, offering a functional synthesis of how informal infographics shape fashion consumption.

Table 1. Analytical dimensions and visual-cognitive functions in digital fashion communication

Dimension	Functional definition	Typical visual formats	Correspondence with AIDA model
Visual clarity and contextualization	Visual legibility and narrative context to facilitate evaluation of garment features	Outdoor shots, natural poses, real-life settings	Attention & Action
Social media as distributed interpretation	Social platforms as cognitive extensions that supplement brand visuals with user-generated cues	Reels, try-on videos, TikToks, Instagram posts	Interest & Action
Stylistic friction vs. semantic access	Tension between aesthetic sophistication and informational clarity	Editorial shots, extreme angles, artistic framing	Attention vs. Desire
Emotion and relatability	Affective connection and personal identification as drivers of interpretive clarity	Facial expressions, body language, diverse settings	Interest & Desire
Perceptual segmentation	Interpretation varies by demographic (age, gender), affecting visual decoding strategies	Gendered styling, platform-specific formats	Varies by user segment
Visual diversity as epistemic infrastructure	Inclusive representation as a structural requirement for semantic accessibility	Varied body types, inclusive scenarios, UGC	Desire & Action

Source(s): Conceptual framework developed by the authors based on prior literature, 2025.

2. Objectives and Hypotheses

The overarching objective of this research is to determine how user-generated fashion visuals operate as informal infographics that influence both cognitive interpretation and emotional engagement among users from Generations Y and Z, fostering interpretive clarity and informed decision-making. Specifically, the study aims to (1) analyze how young audiences interpret fashion visuals as narrative and informational structures, (2) identify the cognitive and emotional factors involved in their visual evaluation—such as attention, comprehension, empathy, and identification, (3) explore perceptual differences related to gender and age within these generations, and (4) assess the extent to which visual diversity, expressed through body types, contexts, and authenticity, affects users' trust and purchase intention.

This study is grounded in the central hypothesis that user-generated fashion visuals can operate as informal infographics—non-standardized visual systems that communicate meaning through embodiment, contextual elements, and affective cues rather than through conventional charts or textual explanations. Such visuals are expected to reduce cognitive effort by enhancing interpretive clarity, emotional identification, and usability in fashion-related decision-making processes.

More precisely, it is hypothesized that (H1) user-generated visuals enhance cognitive accessibility and comprehension compared to brand-generated visuals; (H2) emotional engagement—manifested through processes of identification and empathy—mediates the relationship between exposure to these visuals and the intention to purchase; and (H3) gender and age are expected to moderate visual interpretation, with female participants tending to emphasize identification processes and male participants focusing more strongly on product quality cues.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This research adopts an exploratory orientation, not aiming to generalize findings to the entire population but to generate insight into emergent visual decoding practices in digital fashion cultures. This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to investigate how digital consumers from Generation Y and Z decode and evaluate visual content in fashion communication.

The rationale behind this choice is rooted in the multidimensionality: the communicative effectiveness of visual elements in e-commerce platforms and social media encompasses cognitive, emotional, and symbolic dimensions that cannot be fully captured through either numerical indicators or subjective narratives alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Accordingly, the research was structured into two sequential and complementary phases. The first, quantitative phase, consisted of an online survey designed to measure user preferences, perceived clarity, and visual interpretation habits in fashion-related contexts. The second, qualitative phase, involved semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring the cognitive, affective, and symbolic dimensions underlying the behavioral patterns identified in the survey.
In alignment with this framework, the study integrates the AIDA model to guide both the conceptual and analytical dimensions of the research design. The six interpretive dimensions presented in the introduction further structured the analytical process, bridging the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study.

3.2. Sample, participants, and data collection

The population of interest comprised individuals from Generations Y and Z (born between 1981 and 2012), selected due to their high integration into digital visual cultures and their prominence as both consumers and creators of fashion-related content.

The first phase of the study was quantitative and involved the administration of an online survey. A total of 121 complete responses were collected between February and March 2025. The survey was distributed to approximately 400 individuals using a non-probabilistic snowball sampling strategy, primarily via social media platforms (Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter/X) and academic mailing lists. The main dissemination networks were based in Spain and the United Kingdom.

Two inclusion criteria were applied to ensure participant relevance: (1) having purchased at least one fashion item online within the previous 12 months; and (2) regularly engaging with fashion-related visual content on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, or brand websites. These criteria ensured experiential grounding and sufficient visual exposure.

Since recipients could further disseminate the survey within their own networks, the total number of individuals exposed cannot be determined with precision.

In terms of generational distribution, 65 participants (53.7%) belonged to Generation Z and 56 (46.3%) to Generation Y. The sample included 73 women (60.3%), 44 men (36.4%), and 4 respondents (3.3%) who identified as non-binary or other. Regarding geographic location, 57 respondents (47.1%) were based in the United Kingdom, 48 (39.7%) in Spain, and 16 (13.2%) in other European countries, including Portugal, Sweden, Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands. This distribution aligns with the main dissemination networks concentrated in Spain and the United Kingdom.

The second phase of the research consisted of a qualitative analysis through eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Interviewees were selected from among the survey respondents and met the same inclusion criteria as in the quantitative phase. Purposive sampling was used to ensure demographic variation and conceptual diversity aligned with the study's objectives. Interviews were conducted until thematic saturation was reached. The final sample comprised four participants from Generation Y and four from Generation Z: two men and two women in each generational cohort. Of the eight interviewees, four were based in Spain and four in the United Kingdom. All participants had recent experience with online fashion shopping and demonstrated familiarity with fashion-related visual content across digital platforms.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and were fully transcribed with participants' informed consent. No personal identifiers were retained, and ethical protocols regarding confidentiality and voluntary participation were strictly observed. Participants were encouraged to refer to specific visual stimuli—such as screenshots, social media posts, or digital campaigns—they found particularly effective or problematic. This technique facilitated the anchoring of abstract reflections in concrete visual examples, enhancing the analytical richness and contextual depth of the data (Flick, 2018). The selection of participants prioritized narrative depth and experiential insight over statistical representativeness, in line with the exploratory goals of the study.

3.3. Analytical strategy and variables

In the quantitative phase, the unit of analysis was the individual user. Key variables included: (a) degree of perceived visual clarity; (b) presence of contextual and styling cues; (c) visual diversity (body types, racial representation, environments); (d) use of social media as a visual complement; and (e) trust/confusion generated by specific visual formats. The questionnaire consisted of five thematic blocks (demographics, digital habits, platform experience, social media use, and visual feedback). It included Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions, and was pilot-tested with a group of 10 users to ensure clarity and usability. The survey design combined closed and open formats to balance standardization with expressive nuance.

In the qualitative phase, the unit of analysis was the discursive construction of visual interpretation. Thematic coding followed a deductive approach based on the AIDA model, reinterpreted through cognitive-communicational lenses, and informed by concepts from visual semiotics and information design (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Analytical categories included: attention triggers, cognitive facilitators of interest and desire, signs of ambiguity or overload, and decision moments linked to visual composition. A semi-open coding structure allowed for pattern recognition across cases while remaining sensitive to emergent phenomena. The integration of semiotic and communicational dimensions enabled a layered reading of users' interpretive strategies.

3.4. Validity, rigor, and ethical considerations

To ensure scientific rigor, several strategies were adopted. First, the survey instrument was built upon validated constructs from literature on consumer behaviour and visual communication and adapted to focus on interpretative aspects rather than purchase intention. The interview protocol was informed by survey results and reviewed by two academic experts to ensure coherence and neutrality.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process, with the researcher documenting interpretive decisions and analytical shifts.

Second, methodological triangulation was applied through the integration of qualitative and quantitative data, enhancing reliability and interpretive depth. Reflexive coding practices were employed to document researcher biases and decision-making during analysis. Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the study, the emphasis was placed on internal consistency and analytical plausibility rather than external validity. Responses from participants identifying as non-binary or other gender (n = 4; 3.3%) were included in the descriptive analysis but not interpreted analytically due to limited representation.

Finally, the study adhered to standard ethical guidelines. Participants provided informed consent, were guaranteed confidentiality, and retained the right to withdraw at any stage. The data collection process was fully documented to enable replicability. Instruments and coding frameworks are available upon request. All procedures complied with institutional research ethics policies.

4. Results

To structure the results, this study identified six key dimensions through which participants interpreted fashion visuals:

4.1. Visual clarity and contextualization

Survey data (n = 121) show a clear preference for product images with contextual or narrative elements. A total of 82.6% of participants (n = 100) expressed a preference for visuals featuring real environments, dynamic poses, or diverse models. Only 17.4% of survey participants (n = 21) expressed a preference solely for studio or minimalist imagery, and even then, only when the garment remained visually legible. These preferences were corroborated by the qualitative interviews (n = 8), in which participants emphasized the relevance of styling, body language, and emotional expression as interpretive aids.

Overall, these findings suggest that participants value not visual complexity per se, but informational sufficiency and semantic clarity. Effective product imagery is expected to support interpretation by offering clear, context-rich visual cues.

Participants consistently identified colour, composition, and background simplicity as key visual elements shaping emotional and cognitive engagement with fashion items. Interview data reinforced this view, revealing a strong preference for visual compositions that emphasized the garment as the focal point, featured clean or neutral backgrounds, and employed coherent colour palettes. Participants described colour as both a perceptual anchor and an emotional trigger. They reported stronger engagement with visuals featuring warm or seasonally appropriate colour schemes, particularly when garment tones harmonized with the environment. These chromatic choices were understood as enhancing mood, memorability, and affective identification.

Similarly, composition was described in functional terms. Participants valued symmetry, contrast balance, and figure-ground clarity, especially when these elements aided rapid evaluation and product comprehension. Visuals that lacked compositional coherence were often dismissed as untrustworthy or difficult to interpret. These findings reinforce the idea that formal design variables—such as colour and spatial organization—help scaffold interpretation and emotional connection.

4.2. Social media as a distributed system of visual interpretation

Quantitative data indicate that 42.1% of participants selected “always” and 35.5% selected “often” when asked whether they consult social media before purchasing fashion, amounting to 77.7% who reported frequent use of these platforms. Only 5.8% indicated “never”. The platforms most frequently cited in open responses were Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest. This pattern suggests that participants often engage in a sequential process, using social media as a complement to brand websites. Participants actively sought additional visual information to assess relevance, fit, and usability.

The qualitative interviews confirmed this trend. Participants described how hauls, try-ons and styling reels, offered clearer insights into garments’ materiality and styling. These user-generated formats were valued not for their production quality but for their cognitive utility.

Participants reported using these videos to verify sizing, assess garment behaviour in real-life contexts, and gain alternative perspectives unavailable in brand photography.

Participant descriptions indicate that social media platforms serve as interpretive environments that provide supplementary visual cues. These informal formats were perceived as enhancing clarity and relatability.

4.3. Stylistic friction vs. semantic access

Survey responses and qualitative interviews revealed a recurrent tension between visual creativity and semantic clarity in brand imagery. A total of 89 participants (73.6%) reported experiencing at least one visual barrier that interfered with garment interpretation. Among the most frequently cited were distorted lighting, exaggerated poses, and artistic backgrounds. This pattern was observed across age groups, with 72.3% of Generation Z participants and 75.0% of millennials reporting such barriers (See table 2).

Table 2. Most frequently reported visual barriers and generational distribution of responses.

a) Visual barriers most frequently reported

Visual Barrier	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Distorted lighting	41	33.9%
Exaggerated poses	40	33.1%
Artistic backgrounds	36	29.8%

b) Proportion of participants by generation

Generation	Participants with barriers (n)	Percentage (%)
Gen Z (n = 65)	47	72.3%
Millennials (n = 56)	42	75.0%
Total (n = 121)	89	73.6%

Source(s): Authors' own data (online survey responses, n = 121).

Note: Participants could select more than one barrier when responding to this item.

In the qualitative interviews, participants also cited cluttered settings, inconsistent lighting, and distracting props as visual obstacles that increased interpretive effort. These design choices, while often intended to enhance artistic appeal, were described as interfering with clarity—particularly when they obscured garment details or diverted attention from key attributes such as fit, fabric, and cut. Interviewees gave specific examples, such as visuals from brands like Zara, which they found visually appealing but difficult to decode. Disengagement occurred when artistic styling hindered the ability to assess structural garment features, often turning to social media content for clarification. Visual friction—defined here as the cognitive effort required to interpret product-related information—was consistently mentioned as a usability barrier.

4.4. Emotion and relatability in visual evaluation

Participants emphasized emotional connection and self-identification as key elements in their interpretation of fashion visuals. 47.9% of survey respondents considered identification with the image to be very important, and an additional 31.4% viewed it as somewhat important. 19.0% rated it as slightly important, while only 1.7% indicated it was not important.

Quantitative findings reveal distinct patterns in how emotions contribute to the formation of visual trust in fashion contexts. Across the full sample (n = 121), the most frequently cited emotions were joy (43.0%), confidence (40.5%), and naturalness (33.1%). In the interviews, respondents described how images featuring relatable models, natural expressions, and real-life scenarios enhanced engagement and cognitive processing. The absence of visual diversity—especially in body shape and lifestyle—was cited as a barrier to assessing relevance. Participants struggled to imagine wearing a product when the model felt physically or contextually distant.

These findings suggest that affective framing—through gestures, facial expressions, or contextual cues—acts as a crucial facilitator of interpretive access. In digital environments where physical interaction with the product is absent, emotion and relatability compensate by supporting identification and purchase confidence.

4.5. Perceptual segmentation

The analysis revealed that visual interpretation is not uniform across participants. It varies significantly by age and gender, shaping visual preferences and decoding strategies.

A generational breakdown highlights relevant contrasts in platform reliance. Among Generation Z participants (n = 65), 46.2% reported "always" consulting social media before buying fashion items, and 36.9% selected "often," amounting to 83.1%. In contrast, among Millennials (n = 56), 37.5% selected "always" and 33.9% "often," amounting to 71.4%. (see table 3). This generational contrast was echoed in the interviews: Generation Z participants described a peer-guided evaluation process, with platforms like TikTok playing a central role in evaluating product fit, style, and authenticity. Millennials, by contrast, reported beginning their evaluations on brand websites and turning to social media only when brand imagery lacked clarity or contextual richness.

Table 3. Responses to the question: "Do you consult social media before buying fashion items?"

Generation	Always	Often	Sometimes	Never	Total respondents
1981–1996 (Millennial)	21 (37.5%)	19 (33.9%)	10 (17.9%)	6 (10.7%)	56
1997–2012 (Gen Z)	30 (46.2%)	24 (36.9%)	10 (15.4%)	1 (1.5%)	65
Total	51 (42.1%)	43 (35.5%)	20 (16.5%)	7 (5.8%)	121

Source(s): Authors' own data (online survey responses, n = 121).
Note: Percentages are based on the total number of respondents within each generation. This was a single-choice question; participants selected only one frequency option.

Gender-based distinctions also emerged in relation to preferred image formats. Female participants (n = 73) and non-binary/other gender respondents (n = 4) most frequently identified try-on videos, diverse models, and real-life scenarios as helpful for interpretation. Male respondents (n = 44), selected studio photography and multi-angle views (see Table 4). These quantitative findings were supported by qualitative data, in which women emphasized bodily resemblance and contextual relatability, whereas men highlighted material quality and structural coherence.

Table 4. Helpful image formats by gender

Helpful image type	Mentions by women (n = 73)	Mentions by men (n = 44)	Mentions by other gender (n = 4)	Total mentions (n = 121)
Try-on videos	35 (47.9%)	12 (27.3%)	3 (75%)	50 (41.3%)
Diverse models	34 (46.6%)	9 (20.5%)	4 (100%)	47 (38.8%)
Real-life scenarios	31 (42.5%)	9 (20.5%)	3 (75%)	43 (35.5%)
Studio images	13 (17.8%)	14 (31.8%)	1 (25%)	28 (23.1%)
Multi-angle views	10 (13.7%)	13 (29.5%)	1 (25%)	24 (19.8%)

Source(s): Authors' own data (online survey responses, n = 121).
Note: Respondents could select more than one option. Percentages are based on the total number of respondents within each gender group.

Emotional associations further illustrated these interpretive differences. When asked which emotions contributed to trust in fashion imagery, Generation Z respondents most frequently selected joy (47.7%) and naturalness (36.9%), reflecting a preference for emotionally resonant and relatable visuals. Millennials, by contrast, emphasized confidence (39.3%) and joy (37.5%), indicating a slightly greater orientation toward credibility and clarity.

Gender-based patterns reinforced these distinctions. Women (n = 73) most often selected joy (49.3%) and confidence (42.5%). Non-binary/other gender respondents (n = 4) also aligned with this profile. Men (n = 44), however, prioritized confidence (36.4%) and joy (31.8%). These distinctions suggest that perceptual segmentation in fashion is shaped not only by visual preferences but also by emotional expectations linked to demographic variables (see Table 5).

Table 5. Emotions associated with visual trust by generation and gender

Emotion	Total Mentions (n=121)	Total %	Gen Z	Millennials	Female	Male	Other
Joy	52	43.0%	31 (47.7%)	21 (37.5%)	32 (43.8%)	17 (38.6%)	3 (75.0%)
Confidence	49	40.5%	27 (41.5%)	22 (39.3%)	31 (42.5%)	17 (38.6%)	1 (25.0%)
Naturalness	40	33.1%	24 (36.9%)	16 (28.6%)	20 (27.4%)	19 (43.2%)	1 (25.0%)

Source(s): Authors' own data (online survey responses, n = 121).
Note: Respondents could select more than one option. Data are presented by total sample, generation, and gender. Percentages are calculated within each subgroup.

Beyond general prevalence of visual barriers, subgroup differences were also observed. Male participants more frequently reported "distorted lighting" (34.1%), whereas female participants most identified "exaggerated poses" and "artistic backgrounds" (both 24.7%) (see table 6).

Table 6. Visual barriers by gender

Visual Barrier	Female (n=73)	Male (n=44)	Other (n=4)
Artistic backgrounds	18 (24.7%)	8 (18.2%)	2 (50.0%)
Distorted lighting	17 (23.3%)	15 (34.1%)	2 (50.0%)
Exaggerated poses	18 (24.7%)	12 (27.3%)	1 (25.0%)
No movement	17 (23.3%)	11 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)
None	17 (23.3%)	12 (27.3%)	1 (25.0%)

Source(s): Authors' own data (online survey responses, n = 121).
Note: Respondents could select more than one option. total sample (n = 121). Data are presented by gender subgroups. Percentages are calculated within each subgroup.

When generation and gender were examined in combination, additional patterns emerged. Millennial men most frequently reported "distorted lighting" and "no movement" (both 42.1%). Millennial women emphasized "no movement" (38.9%) and "exaggerated poses" (36.1%). Among Generation Z women, the most cited barriers were "artistic backgrounds" (27.0%) and "distorted lighting" (24.3%) (see Table 7).

Table 7. Visual barriers by generation and gender

Visual Barrier	Gen Z - Female (n=37)	Gen Z - Male (n=25)	Gen Z - Other (n=3)	Millennial - Female (n=36)	Millennial - Male (n=19)	Millennial - Other (n=1)
Artistic backgrounds	10 (27.0%)	5 (20.0%)	2 (66.7%)	10 (27.8%)	3 (15.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Distorted lighting	9 (24.3%)	8 (32.0%)	2 (66.7%)	10 (27.8%)	8 (42.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Exaggerated poses	7 (18.9%)	7 (28.0%)	1 (33.3%)	13 (36.1%)	6 (31.6%)	0 (0.0%)
No movement	6 (16.2%)	4 (16.0%)	0 (0.0%)	14 (38.9%)	8 (42.1%)	0 (0.0%)
None	8 (21.6%)	5 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)	12 (33.3%)	8 (42.1%)	1 (100.0%)

Source(s): Authors' own data (online survey responses, n = 121).
Note: Respondents could select more than one option. Data are presented by generation, gender and their intersection. Percentages are calculated within each subgroup.

4.6. Visual diversity as epistemic access infrastructure

Across all eight interviews, participants consistently identified the lack of visual diversity—particularly in terms of body shape, size, and styling—as a major obstacle to evaluating fashion items. This limitation was not framed as a matter of representation or identity, but as a cognitive barrier hindering product assessment. Respondents described standardized brand imagery as lacking relatable reference points. The predominance of uniform model types made it difficult to visualize how garments might appear on their own bodies.

Participants reported turning to alternative visual sources—particularly on social media—where user-generated content offered more varied and realistic depictions. Try-on videos and styling posts were valued for their ability to showcase how garments behave on diverse bodies.

This shift in visual strategy was driven by informational need. The absence of visual diversity was thus experienced not merely as a representational gap, but as a structural deficiency in the epistemic architecture of e-commerce. Without clear, relatable cues, participants described difficulties in making confident decisions, often leading to disengagement.

This qualitative pattern is reinforced by the survey data: 82.6% of participants (n = 100) selected at least one of the following as helpful visual formats —" diverse models," "real-life scenarios," or "try-on videos."

Table 8 presents a selection of participant quotes categorized according to the six analytical dimensions defined in this study. These statements illustrate recurring perceptual patterns in respondents' evaluation of digital fashion content.

Table 8. Participant Quotes by Dimension: Visual Interpretation of Fashion Content

Analytical Dimension	Participant Quote
Emotion and relatability	I want to know how it would look on someone like me. I always go to TikTok to see how it looks on a normal person. If I don't see a body like mine, I can't imagine the fit. Seeing how happy the wearer looks makes me want it. It's more real when someone looks comfortable and smiling.
Perceptual segmentation	I tend to look on Instagram and TikTok for how it looks on me. If I like something, I'll check TikTok to see styling. I check the brand first—if good, I go to Pinterest or Instagram. I look for women that look like me. If not, I go to TikTok. I like to know if it looks rich or cheap and the material. The pictures don't always show if it's going to last or not.
Social media as distributed interpretation	Seeing people wear it their way is more inspiring. Sometimes I don't get a piece until I see it on TikTok. I trust endorsements on Instagram more than brand claims. Hauls help me figure out how I'd wear something.
Stylistic friction vs. semantic access	Zara makes clothes look cool, but I can't tell how they fit. It's annoying when poses hide the shape of the sleeves. Extreme lighting or backgrounds make fabric hard to see. If the photo doesn't help me imagine the item, I move on.
Visual clarity and contextualization	I like to clearly see the item and multiple angles. I like the product to be styled so I can picture it on me. I do like to see how the item is styled with other things.
Visual diversity as epistemic infrastructure	I don't like when the background distracts from the clothes. When the background is too styled, it's confusing. If the lighting is off or blurry, I skip the look. Warm colours and clean backdrops feel more trustworthy. It's hard to picture how it looks on me with only tall, skinny people. If I have to guess if it'll fit me, I'm not buying it. Different faces and bodies make products easier to assess.

Source(s): Authors' own data, based on semi-structured interviews (n = 8).

5. Discussion

5.1. From aesthetics to interpretation: key findings and hypothesis evaluation

The findings of this study confirm a marked shift in how Generations Y and Z engage with digital fashion imagery. Rather than favouring aesthetic maximalism, these users prioritize semantic functionality.

Participants in both the quantitative and qualitative phases identified "visual clarity" and "contextual cues" as critical for interpretability. Images that lacked narrative context—such as flat lays, abstract poses, or stylized editorials—were described as visually engaging but cognitively opaque. Visuals that fail to communicate fit, materiality, or usability diminish trust and reduce cognitive efficacy. These findings align with Albers' (2015) theory of "interpretive friction" and
confirm critiques by Monte-Rojas et al. (2020) and Pérez-Seijo and Vizoso (2021), who argue that prioritizing novelty or immersion without cognitive guidance undermines clarity. Participants favoured visuals that used warm, muted palettes, high contrast between garment and background, and central composition. These micro-design features enhanced trust, legibility, and interpretive flow. Conversely, heavily edited, overly stylized visuals were often dismissed as unhelpful.

These results substantiate the hypothesis that fashion visuals must support not only persuasion but comprehension. They also reflect broader trends identified in prior studies, such as Gallego & Sanz's (2005) exploration of chromatic semiotics and Reinhardt's (2010) framing of visual clarity as an ethical imperative in didactic design.

5.2. Informal infographics and the role of user-generated content

Building on the cognitive and emotional mechanisms discussed above, another dimension that emerged with strong empirical support is the role of informal infographics—particularly user-generated content

(UGC)—as cognitive architecture. This study introduces the concept of "informal infographics" to describe user-generated visuals—such as styling reels, try-on videos, and haul posts—that reduce cognitive load and aid interpretation. These grassroots formats, while lacking formal graphic structure, integrate embodiment, narrative, and context into cognitively optimized visual narratives.

Recent literature supports the epistemic role of user-generated content (UGC). Vázquez et al. (2021) show that UGC enhances emotional, relational, and cognitive engagement, significantly influencing purchase intention. Marwan et al. (2024) further demonstrate that high-quality UGC fosters emotional resonance while reducing uncertainty. Our findings align with this body of research: a majority of participants (77.7%) reported consulting social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok in the process of evaluating fashion products—often after exposure to official brand imagery.

Their interpretive value becomes particularly salient in contrast to the limitations of professional visuals. They are not standardized, but they offer functional clarity, especially when professional visuals are overly stylized or lack context. This shift in interpretive practices aligns with the theoretical contributions of Hutchins (2001) and Rogers (2006), who reconceptualize cognition not as an individual, internal process, but as a distributed phenomenon enacted across people, artifacts, and environments.

Digital platforms function not merely as engines of inspiration, but as distributed cognitive ecologies that extend the user's interpretive capacities beyond the brand's official narrative.

Their success lies in their semantic accessibility and affective resonance, offering interpretive cues through familiar bodies. These informal infographics not only bridge gaps left by brand visuals; they also function as distributed systems of representation, in which diversity operates as both social statement and cognitive scaffolding. This supports the idea that emotional anchoring complements cognitive clarity and can serve as a scaffold for semantic access.

5.3. From visual strategy to epistemic function

While macro-trends in fashion communication often dominate scholarly analysis, this study foregrounds the significance of micro-design features as critical determinants of cognitive accessibility. Survey participants consistently identified visual elements such as colour contrast, spatial centering, and background simplicity as key factors in evaluating garments. Cluttered or stylized settings were perceived as cognitively taxing.

This finding aligns with Albers' (2015) theory that effective visual communication is grounded in micro-architectures of meaning—subtle design decisions that shape visual legibility and direct viewer attention. As Gallego and Sanz (2005) contend, chromatic language is not merely aesthetic; it functions as a semiotic system capable of signaling interpretability. Harmonized colour palettes and calibrated contrasts actively support cognitive processing by reducing interpretive effort and perceptual overload.

The data corroborate this framework. In the survey, 73.6% of participants reported at least one visual barrier that interfered with interpretation, most distorted lighting, exaggerated poses, and artistic backgrounds. Interview participants also described cluttered settings and stylized visuals as cognitively demanding, prompting a preference for high-contrast, centered images. These visual configurations were perceived as more trustworthy and semantically informative. In contrast, images employing dramatic lighting, unconventional camera angles, or heavy post-production filtering were frequently described as "artistic but unhelpful"—particularly when such stylization compromised the visibility and structure.

Functional art direction privileges communicative clarity without sacrificing visual coherence. When color harmonies reinforce context, and when spatial composition aligns with perceptual flow, the image becomes a cognitive guide.

The following design principles are proposed to enhance semantic accessibility and visual clarity in digital fashion communication:

[1] Prioritize neutral or single-color backgrounds to avoid perceptual competition.

[2] Employ balanced compositions and direct gaze orientation to maintain semantic anchoring.

[3] Use tonally coherent colour palettes to cue mood without distorting information.

[4] Limit the use of filters or post-production effects that alter garment visibility.

Ultimately, clarity in fashion visuals is not achieved through visual austerity, but through intentional micro-design. When design elements support comprehension, they foster trust, reduce interpretive friction, and support informed decision-making in screen-based retail contexts.

5.4. Emotion as a semantic catalyst: affect and interpretive clarity

The affective dimension of visual interpretation emerges here as central to semantic accessibility. In the survey, 79.3% of participants considered self-identification a key factor in their evaluation of fashion images. Additionally, the most frequently cited emotions were joy (43.0%), confidence (40.5%), and naturalness (33.1%). These findings support the arguments of Nkosinkulu (2024), Damyanov & Tsankov (2018), and Reinhardt (2010), who conceptualize emotional design as a form of *semantic intensification*, not distraction.

Emotion, in this context, acts as a semantic catalyst—enhancing legibility through identification and empathy. This position aligns with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model and its extensions, such as the P-A-D framework developed by Ariffin et al. (2024), which emphasize the role of affect in shaping interpretive flow and user confidence. When visuals resonate emotionally—via familiar expressions, gestures, or embodied context—they guide attention and lower cognitive barriers.

Participants favoured visuals that conveyed affective clarity: relatable expressions and dynamic poses that evoked real-world use. These emotional anchors amplified interpretive confidence, supporting the idea that emotional resonance aids comprehension.

In digital fashion e-commerce, where physical interaction is absent, this form of affective infographic—visuals that combine clarity, context, and emotion—offers a compelling model for emotionally grounded semantic accessibility. It reframes visual strategy as a synthesis of cognition and affect.

5.5. Perceptual segmentation: how gender and age shape visual reading

This study confirms that visual interpretation in digital fashion environments is not uniform but stratified by generational and gender-based variables, which shape distinct decoding strategies, expectations, and trust responses.

Generational contrasts were especially marked. Survey data showed that 83.1% of Generation Z participants reported frequently consulting social media before purchasing fashion items, compared to 71.4% of Millennials. While both groups sought interpretive support, Generation Z participants favoured emotionally resonant and user-generated formats such as TikTok try-on videos and styling reels. In contrast, Millennials adopted a more structured interpretive sequence, often beginning their evaluation with brand websites and turning to social media only when official visuals lacked semantic clarity or contextual cues.

These differences extended to emotional responses to visual content. Generation Z participants most often associated visual trust with joy (47.7%) and naturalness (36.9%), while Millennials emphasized confidence (39.3%) and joy (37.5%). This suggests that Generation Z's engagement is shaped by affective anchoring and peer-based validation, while Millennials display a stronger preference for visual coherence and credibility.

Women and non-binary respondents most frequently selected try-on videos, diverse models, and real-life scenarios as helpful visual formats. In contrast, male participants showed a preference for studio images and multi-angle views, favouring visual formats that offered structural detail and product clarity. These choices were mirrored in emotional associations: women most often cited joy (49.3%) and confidence (42.5%), while men prioritized confidence (36.4%) and joy (31.8%).

These perceptual patterns were also reflected in the types of visual barriers encountered. While 73.6% of participants reported experiencing at least one visual obstacle, the nature of these barriers varied across demographic groups. These distinctions became even more pronounced when gender and generation were considered together. Millennial men, for instance, frequently cited "no movement" and "distorted lighting," suggesting a preference for visuals that are dynamic and technically precise. In contrast, Generation Z women more often identified "artistic backgrounds" as barriers, indicating a greater sensitivity to environmental stylization. These patterns underscore how the same visual element can be perceived as expressive by some and obstructive by others.

Recent literature reinforces this segmentation. Awad's (2023) multimodal analysis of H&M campaigns shows that male-targeted and female-targeted ads deploy distinct semiotic resources, reflecting gendered assumptions about visual literacy and product engagement. Our findings align with this: female participants prioritized emotional expression and contextual cues, while male participants

valued structural precision. These choices suggest not only divergent aesthetic preferences but distinct epistemic orientations.

Age also mediates perceptual coding. As Bøilerehauge & Jørgensen (2019) show, older consumers prefer visuals that emphasize realism versus stereotype. In our study, Millennials displayed a stronger preference for detail-oriented, high-clarity visuals, while Generation Z respondents showed greater tolerance for ambiguity, provided the visual tone was emotionally authentic. These nuances highlight that visual trust is situated: it arises when the visual content aligns with the perceptual frameworks of the viewer.

This variability challenges the notion of a universally "effective" fashion image. Instead, efficacy must be understood as contextual and relational: what fosters trust and clarity for one group may produce ambiguity for another. Hence, personalization becomes not just a marketing strategy, but a cognitive necessity.

For e-commerce and fashion communication, the implications are clear. Our data support the need for multiple interpretive pathways, including zoomable images, diverse models, contextualized scenarios, and emotionally rich formats. Visual strategies must adapt not only to device constraints but to the demographic and affective profiles of users.

In short, perception is not pre-given but contextually engineered. Designing for perceptual segmentation means recognizing interpretive diversity as a core design variable. When embraced, this diversity becomes a communicative asset—enhancing both semantic clarity and emotional resonance across user cohorts. Overall, these dynamics show how microformal design choices translate perception into cognition, paving the way for representation to be understood as epistemic infrastructure.

5.6. Representation as cognitive infrastructure

A key insight emerging from this study is the reframing of visual diversity not as an ethical surplus, but as essential to interpretation. In line with Pérez-Seijo and Vizoso (2021), the absence of bodily and contextual heterogeneity in digital fashion visuals does not merely reflect a symbolic omission—it generates epistemic opacity. Representation is not just about sociocultural inclusion; it is an infrastructural element of communicative functionality. As Zallio (2022) argues, truly inclusive design cannot be limited to aesthetic or technical criteria; it must function as an ecosystem that evolves with people, enabling physical access and cognitive autonomy.

Survey findings indicate that a substantial majority of participants (82.6%, n = 100 out of 121) identified at least one of the following formats as helpful for fashion evaluation: "diverse models," "real-life scenarios," or "try-on videos." Qualitative interviews confirmed that stylized, homogeneous representations hinder projection and usability. As one respondent noted: "If the model doesn't look anything like me, how can I know if this will look good or even fit?" This reflects not aesthetic preference but cognitive access: diverse imagery enhances legibility, confidence, and relevance. Thus, visual diversity operates as an epistemic mechanism, redistributing interpretive agency across users and enacting what Fricker (2007) describes as *epistemic justice*—the right to understand and be recognized as a credible interpreter within digital visual systems. This redistribution also echoes Rancière's (2004) notion of the *distribution of the sensible*, where visual arrangements determine who is entitled to perceive and interpret.

These findings reinforce Reinhardt's (2010) claim that diversity in visual communication supports not only inclusion but didactic efficiency. This view is supported by Sánchez-Labella et al. (2022), who argue that visual design choices—such as character depiction, movement, and framing—are not neutral but carry implicit cultural codes that influence how viewers interpret identity, gender, and agency. Diverse bodies, settings, and gestures serve as cognitive maps—tools for simulating product use, assessing fit, and contextualizing relevance. Noris and Cantoni (2022) affirm this by showing that visual homogeneity reduces engagement among users seeking clarity and usability.

Furthermore, Gran et al. (2019) argue that visual diversity functions as part of digital media infrastructure. It is not rhetorical but epistemic—a requirement for semantic legibility across heterogeneous audiences. Werner (2019) adds that integrating diversity dismantles visual norms that exclude marginalized users. Our data support this: UGC formats like haul videos and try-on posts offer epistemic alternatives to the limitations of traditional commercial visuals.

This reframing calls for a broader view of inclusive design. Diversity is not a rhetorical addition but an operational mechanism for accessibility. When representation is restricted, interpretive access is constrained. The epistemic function of diversity is to broaden cognitive reach across user profiles, transforming visuals into tools of knowledge transmission.

5.7. Informal infographics as an epistemic system: rethinking design in digital fashion

Our findings suggest a theoretical redefinition of how visual content functions in digital fashion. What users demand from visuals—clarity, emotion, realism, and contextual richness—is not merely aesthetic enhancement; it is a form of cognitive assistance. These visual pieces, particularly those generated by users—reels, hauls, selfies, reviews—function as informal infographics: not graphs, not diagrams, but visual artifacts that support understanding and decision-making.

This aligns with Albers´ (2015) argument that infographics are fundamentally about reducing interpretive effort. Similarly, Reinhardt (2010) emphasizes that pedagogic visuality must not obscure the meaning behind formalism. These "infographics," built by users rather than designers, follow an emergent logic: instead of hierarchy, they offer relatability; instead of clarity by reduction, they offer clarity by contextual depth. They are not engineered—but they are effective.

The data supports this claim. As found in our study, 77.7% of participants turn to social media content to "better understand" what commercial visuals obscure. These behaviours respond to gaps left by traditional brand visuals. In fact, the user-generated visuals that circulate widely on Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube fulfill many of the roles that classical infographics do: they isolate variables (angle, texture, movement), provide side-by-side comparisons (before/after, model/user), and contextualize the data (body type, use scenario).

As Vázquez et al. (2021) show, these visuals also trigger what the S-O-R model calls "flow states"—where emotional resonance and interactive engagement merge into seamless decision-making. The so-called "aesthetic experience" becomes a gateway to cognitive action: identification, projection, and finally, purchase. These findings support a paradigmatic shift: visual communication in fashion must no longer be framed as branding alone, but as infrastructural epistemology.

From a design theory perspective, this means that user-generated content is not noise but knowledge; not supplement but system. It corrects, expands, and recontextualizes what traditional e-commerce visuals often fail to deliver. Informal though it may be, its infographic function is real, distributed, and—above all—trusted.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the epistemic function of fashion visuals in digital commerce, proposing the concept of informal infographics. Through a mixed-methods design, we examined how users from Generations Y (Millennials) and Z decode and evaluate brand and user-generated visuals within e-commerce environments. The results confirm that digital fashion visuals are not merely aesthetic or persuasive artifacts; they serve as tools of semantic orientation, affective engagement, and cognitive navigation. Users demand clarity, realism, and context—not as secondary features, but as infrastructural components of effective visual communication.

The findings collectively support a redefinition of fashion imagery not as a passive display mechanism but as an active epistemic infrastructure. Across all dimensions explored—clarity, emotion, diversity, and segmentation—participants emphasized that effective visuals must reduce interpretive friction and support decision-making. Rather than privileging aesthetic novelty, users demanded functionality: visuals that not only represent garments but explain their fit, texture, and contextual use.

This evolving paradigm, crystallized in the concept of informal infographics, positions user-generated content as central to digital fashion literacy. By integrating narrative, emotion, and realism, these visuals fulfill roles traditionally reserved for institutional communication—transforming social media into a distributed system of cognitive scaffolding. These visuals recalibrate the relationship between viewer and image, shifting from persuasion to participation, from standardization to semantic accessibility—a reordering that redefines the politics of visual knowledge.

The central contribution of this article lies in extending infographic theory beyond its conventional applications to journalism and education, arguing that user-generated content (UGC) in fashion e-commerce operates as an informal infographic model. These user visuals, though informal, fulfill a

communicative function akin to traditional infographics: reducing interpretive friction, guiding cognitive processing, and scaffolding decision-making. By reconceptualizing styling reels, hauls, and try-ons as informal infographics that combine emotional and cognitive accessibility, this study sheds light on a distributed epistemic system where users are not just consumers of fashion content but co-authors of visual meaning.

Methodologically, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data allowed us to capture both generalizable trends and nuanced interpretive practices. The high preference for contextualized, diverse, and affectively resonant visuals—along with the widespread reliance on social media platforms for supplementary interpretation—underscores the insufficiency of current commercial visual strategies. In this context, UGC does not merely complement brand imagery; it repairs its cognitive and emotional deficiencies.

Nevertheless, the study focused primarily on fashion e-commerce, and future research should evaluate the applicability of the informal infographic model in other commercial domains.

Critically, the findings raise deeper questions about the politics of visual knowledge in commercial environments. When brand-generated contents prioritize stylistic coherence over cognitive accessibility, they do not simply fail in design—they exclude. Aesthetic decisions become epistemic barriers, denying users the ability to fully assess, interpret, or identify with what is shown. In this light, the image ceases to be neutral and becomes a gatekeeper. Informal infographics, as produced by everyday users, reclaim this space—not only by democratizing representation but by reasserting the right to understand. This shift reveals that epistemic justice in digital fashion communication requires more than inclusive representation—it demands design strategies that acknowledge heterogeneity as foundational. The future of fashion imagery lies not in amplifying spectacle, but in designing for understanding. What is at stake, then, is the epistemic justice of visual culture in digital commerce.

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