



Emotional Encounters and Digital Intimacy: Exploring Consumer Experiences with Augmented Reality in Fashion E-Commerce

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ABSTRACT

Augmented Reality (AR) has emerged as a transformative tool in digital marketing particularly in fashion e-commerce, where it enhances consumer interaction and engagement. While prior studies have focused on behavioral outcomes of AR, little is known about the emotional and symbolic experiences consumers derive from these interactions. This study addresses that gap by asking: how do consumers emotionally experience AR features in fashion e-commerce, and what meanings do they assign to these interactions? Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study explores the lived experiences of twelve urban consumers who have engaged with AR try-on features in fashion retail applications. Data were collected through in-depth, semi structured interviews and analyzed thematically to uncover essential themes such as digital intimacy, emotional engagement, technological trust, and self-expression. Key findings reveal that AR try-ons evoke a sense of playful experimentation, emotional connection, and increased confidence in purchase decisions. Participants described AR as a medium for personal storytelling and identity reinforcement, often interpreting it as a bridge between physical and digital self-expression. The findings show that AR interactions are perceived as emotionally resonant and identity-relevant, fostering stronger consumer-brand connections beyond functional engagement. These insights highlight the value of phenomenology in uncovering affective dimensions that traditional quantitative approaches often overlook. The results contribute to a richer understanding of how immersive technologies shape consumer perception and behavior, and offer a theoretical foundation for future research on digital consumer experiences.



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INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of digital commerce, the integration of immersive technologies—particularly Augmented Reality (AR)—has significantly reshaped consumer-brand interactions. As fashion e-commerce platforms increasingly adopt AR-based features to simulate virtual try-on experiences, the boundary between physical and digital consumer engagement continues to blur (Mattera dkk., 2020). This transformation reflects a broader cultural shift toward personalization, real-time interactivity, and technological embodiment in daily consumer practices.

The proliferation of AR in retail environments is not merely a technological advancement but a phenomenon that reflects deeper sociocultural changes. Consumers are no longer passive recipients of marketing content; instead, they actively participate in co-creating brand meaning through interactive digital experiences. In this context, AR functions not only as a utility but as a medium for emotional engagement and identity construction. These experiences are embedded in broader societal narratives surrounding self-expression, consumer autonomy, and the search for authenticity in digital spaces.

Given this cultural significance, there is a growing need to explore how individuals subjectively experience such technologically mediated interactions. While existing literature has examined AR's effectiveness in influencing purchase intentions, decision-making, and user satisfaction (Nguyen & Zhao, 2021), less attention has been paid to the affective and experiential dimensions of these encounters. As consumers navigate AR environments, they are not simply evaluating products—they are engaging in emotionally charged, symbolic processes that merit closer interpretative inquiry.

A phenomenological lens provides the necessary framework to explore the lived realities of consumers who interact with AR technologies. By prioritizing subjective experience and meaning-making, phenomenology enables researchers to uncover the essence of consumer-brand relationships as shaped by immersive technological experiences. This approach is especially relevant in contexts where emotional connection, personal relevance, and interpretive depth play pivotal roles in shaping consumer behavior.

In recent years, scholarly interest in understanding how individuals subjectively experience technological interfaces—particularly in marketing and consumer behavior—has gained substantial momentum. Within this domain, the experiential dimensions of Augmented Reality (AR) in e-commerce have emerged as a particularly compelling subject, especially given the increasing prevalence of AR-enabled consumer interactions in the fashion industry. These experiences are not simply utilitarian but are often rich in emotional, symbolic, and interpretative meanings that shape consumer attitudes and brand loyalty.

However, the methodological exploration of such experiences presents significant challenges. Much of the existing research on AR in retail contexts has employed quantitative approaches, focusing on metrics such as usability, engagement rates, purchase intention, or conversion statistics (Oyewo dkk., 2023). While these studies offer valuable insights into behavioral outcomes, they often fail to capture the nuanced, lived experiences and emotional interpretations that consumers attach to their interactions with AR technology. As a result, essential elements of human experience—such as intimacy, trust, delight, and identity formation—remain underexplored or overlooked entirely.

This methodological limitation underscores the inadequacy of traditional empirical models to account for the subjective realities of consumers within immersive digital environments. When emotional resonance and symbolic meaning are central to the phenomenon being studied, standardized survey instruments or laboratory-based experiments tend to fall short. They reduce complex affective phenomena to measurable variables, stripping away the contextual and interpretive richness necessary to fully understand how consumers experience technologically mediated brand encounters. Consequently, there is a critical need for qualitative approaches, such as phenomenology, that can illuminate the essence of these experiences from the inside out.

Despite the growing adoption of AR technologies in digital marketing, most existing investigations have relied heavily on practical and quantitative frameworks that focus on behavioral metrics and user satisfaction indicators. These conventional approaches—while effective in measuring surface-level outcomes such as purchase conversion, dwell time, and engagement—fail to account for the nuanced, affective, and interpretive dimensions that define the consumer's emotional experience with AR in fashion e-commerce. As a result, our understanding remains limited to functional effectiveness, neglecting how consumers actually feel, make sense of, and attach meaning to their immersive interactions with brands.

This narrow scope creates a significant gap in comprehending the deeper psychological and symbolic processes involved in AR-facilitated brand relationships. Studies such as those by (Pasko dkk., 2022) have acknowledged the emotional potential of AR technologies, yet few have pursued a methodology capable of capturing the essence of such experiences from the participant's perspective. The predominant reliance on structured questionnaires and controlled environments constrains the richness of human expression, thereby reducing complex emotional states to predefined categories or Likert-scale responses.

To bridge this gap, phenomenological inquiry offers an essential alternative. Unlike traditional methods, phenomenology prioritizes the lived experience, allowing for a more holistic and layered exploration of how individuals interpret and internalize their encounters with AR. By emphasizing subjective meaning and emotional depth, this approach enables researchers to illuminate the affective textures and existential nuances that shape consumer behavior in technologically mediated environments. In doing so, it addresses not only what consumers do with AR, but how and why those experiences resonate on a personal level—an understanding that is crucial for developing more empathetic and meaningful marketing strategies.

Previous studies have explored the use of Augmented Reality (AR) in marketing by focusing on user engagement, satisfaction, and purchasing behavior. However, only a few have examined how consumers emotionally experience AR features, especially in the context of fashion e-commerce. Research by (Sewpersadh, 2019) acknowledges the emotional potential of immersive technologies but lacks deeper insights into how meaning is created. Most existing methods remain limited to surface-level analysis and overlook the internal experiences of users. These limitations show the need for a more interpretative approach that centers on lived experiences.

This study adopts Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how consumers experience emotional and symbolic interactions with AR features. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to uncover how participants make sense of their encounters in a deeply personal way. Unlike traditional models, IPA focuses on meaning, emotional depth, and the subjective nature of individual experience. It is especially suitable for addressing the knowledge gap related to digital intimacy, trust, and identity formation in consumer-brand relationships. Through this lens, the study reveals the inner dynamics of how AR shapes consumer perception and behavior.

The article is structured as follows: it begins with an introduction that outlines the context of the study and presents the research gap (“Digital marketing strategies in COVID-19: A focus on tourism recovery,” 2023). This is followed by a section describing the phenomenological approach and the rationale behind choosing IPA. The next sections detail the data collection process and the analytic procedures used to identify themes from participant narratives. The findings are presented thematically, highlighting the emotional and symbolic experiences shared by consumers. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the implications and contributions of the study to marketing research and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the emotional experiences of consumers interacting with Augmented Reality (AR) features on fashion e-commerce platforms. The phenomenological design was selected due to its emphasis on uncovering the lived experiences and subjective meanings attributed to a particular phenomenon by individuals. Phenomenology enables an in-depth investigation of the essence of consumer experiences beyond surface-level behaviors or outcomes.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, was applied in this study to delve into how participants interpret their emotional responses and sense of intimacy with brands in digital contexts (Tan dkk., 2022). This approach focuses on the dual processes of empathy and interpretation, enabling the identification of deeper experiential themes derived from personal narratives. Such a framework is particularly suitable for marketing research that seeks to understand symbolic and emotional dimensions of technology-mediated consumer interactions.

To enhance methodological rigor and transparency, this study also incorporated researcher reflexivity and positionality. The first author, who conducted and analyzed all interviews, maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process to critically examine personal biases, assumptions, and prior knowledge about AR technologies. This was crucial in recognizing how interpretative lenses might influence data interpretation. The researcher's background in digital marketing and familiarity

with AR applications allowed for deeper empathetic engagement with participants, but also necessitated continual reflexive monitoring to avoid projection of personal views. Positionality was openly acknowledged in the analytic memos, ensuring that the emergent themes genuinely reflected participants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's expectations.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their prior experience with AR-based try-on features on fashion e-commerce applications. Inclusion criteria included individuals aged between 20 and 35 years who had interacted with AR features in the past six months, possessed regular online shopping behavior, and self-identified as having made purchase decisions influenced by the AR experience. Exclusion criteria involved individuals who had only limited or one-time exposure to AR or those with no recollection of their emotional response to such technology.

A total of 12 participants were involved in this study, comprising seven females and five males, with an average age of 27.4 years (Tanthanongsakkun dkk., 2023). All participants resided in urban areas and represented various educational and professional backgrounds, including students, digital marketers, and freelance creatives. These demographic characteristics were considered relevant in capturing diverse yet contextually meaningful interpretations of AR-driven shopping experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, guided by a protocol that included open-ended questions designed to elicit emotional responses, perceptions of brand closeness, and reflections on AR usage. Interviews were conducted either in person or via secured video calls, depending on participant availability and preference (Virakul & Russ-Eft, 2020). Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent.

The interviews took place in quiet, familiar environments preferred by the participants to promote comfort and openness during the conversation. The data collection process emphasized creating a psychologically safe space, allowing participants to narrate their experiences freely without external judgment. The interview guide was pilot-tested and adjusted slightly to ensure clarity and alignment with the phenomenological focus.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved a systematic process of identifying themes that emerged from participants' narratives. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of each experience. Meaningful units of text were coded, categorized, and clustered into overarching themes that represented shared patterns and unique insights.

The analytic process included thematic reduction to focus on the essential aspects of the phenomenon while preserving the integrity of individual experiences. NVivo 14 software was used to assist in the coding and organization of data, enhancing the consistency and traceability of analytic decisions. The emergent themes reflected both convergence and divergence in participants' interpretations, ultimately contributing to a nuanced understanding of emotional engagement through AR.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee. All participants provided written informed consent prior to their participation (Su dkk., 2022). Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and removing any identifiable information from transcripts and publications. The study adhered to the ethical standards set forth by the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with relevant national and institutional guidelines for research involving human subjects.

RESULTS

Intimacy with the Brand through AR Immersion

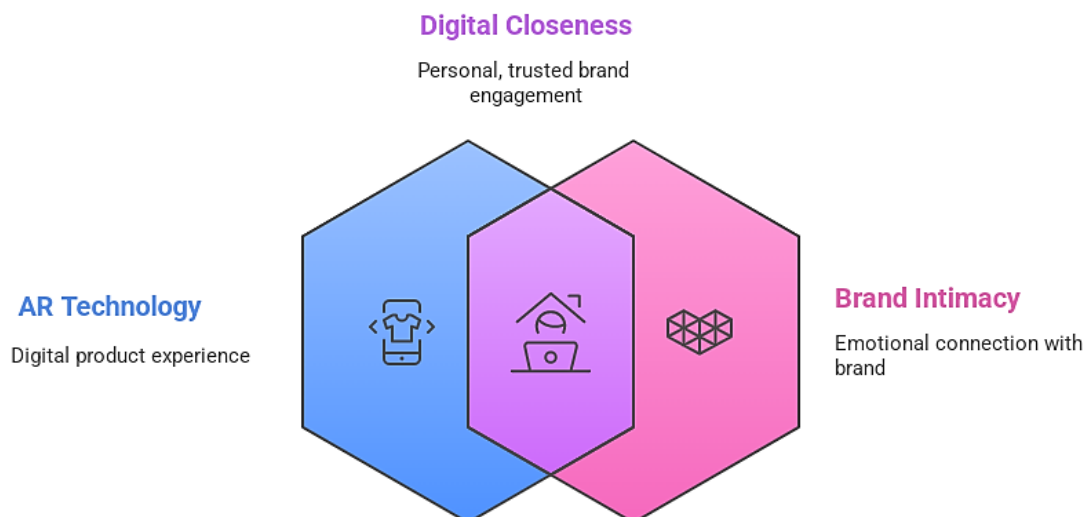
Participants consistently described their interaction with AR technology as facilitating a sense of closeness and emotional connection with the brand. The ability to "try on" products virtually at home cultivated not only convenience but also an experience of presence and engagement, which transformed the interaction into something personal and intimate.

“When I saw myself wearing the dress through the AR feature, it felt as if the brand was speaking directly to me — like it understood my taste and style. It was weirdly personal.” — Participant 3

This sense of intimacy often translated into enhanced trust and brand loyalty. The AR feature was perceived as a bridge between the consumer’s physical reality and the digital brand space, creating what participants termed as “digital closeness.”

“It wasn’t just about the clothes fitting me virtually; it was more about how the experience made me feel seen by the brand. I think that matters now more than ever.” — Participant 7

The Power of AR in Building Brand Intimacy



Emotional Engagement and Affective Resonance

Another prevalent theme was the emotional excitement and pleasure that participants felt during their AR interactions. Many described the experience as “fun,” “entertaining,” and even “joyful,” suggesting that the emotional dimension of AR marketing goes beyond utilitarian value.

“I didn’t expect to enjoy shopping this much! It felt like playing a game, but the stakes were real — my style, my appearance. I smiled a lot.” — Participant 2

The playful nature of AR contributed to emotional resonance, creating a memorable user experience that participants recalled vividly. This emotional engagement seemed to anchor consumer decisions more firmly in personal affect rather than rational analysis.

“I forgot I was shopping. It felt like an adventure — like I was discovering myself through the clothes and the mirror on my phone.” — Participant 6

Trust through Technological Presence

The AR interface, when functioning effectively, elicited feelings of reliability and increased trust in the product and brand. Participants highlighted that being able to visualize a product in real-time fostered a sense of control and reduced anxiety about online purchases.

“Seeing the product on me before buying gave me confidence. It wasn’t a gamble anymore. It felt safe, and that changed the way I view that brand.” — Participant 4

However, participants also noted that when AR features failed or appeared poorly calibrated, it disrupted trust and evoked frustration. The emotional impact of these failures was significant, suggesting that trust in AR is conditional upon its seamless integration and realism.

Augmented Reality as a Pathway to Self-Expression

Several participants described the AR experience as not merely transactional but transformational. The virtual try-on process was often used to explore personal identities, experiment with new looks, and express aspirational selves in ways they might hesitate to do in physical settings.

“With AR, I dared to try something bolder — colors, cuts, styles I wouldn’t wear to a real store. It was liberating.” — Participant 5

This theme suggests that AR technologies, when aligned with user agency and creativity, can act as digital mirrors reflecting not just the product, but the evolving self of the consumer.

The findings reveal that AR technology in e-commerce fashion platforms is experienced by consumers as a profoundly emotional and symbolic encounter. Rather than simply aiding product evaluation, AR facilitates digital intimacy, emotional resonance, and expressions of identity. These experiences highlight the technology’s potential not only as a marketing innovation but as a medium of affective connection and personal meaning-making.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that consumers’ interactions with Augmented Reality (AR) in fashion e-commerce environments are deeply emotional, symbolically rich, and grounded in their sense of self and brand connection (Cheng dkk., 2019). These experiences extend beyond transactional engagement, highlighting how AR facilitates a sense of intimacy, emotional resonance, and personal identity exploration—thus directly addressing the central research question about how consumers emotionally experience and interpret AR-mediated brand interactions.

This research contributes a novel understanding of the phenomenon by revealing that AR does not merely enhance product visualization, but also fosters emotional closeness and consumer trust when implemented effectively. The emergence of themes such as intimacy with the brand, emotional engagement, trust through technology, and self-expression through AR illustrate how immersive experiences shape consumer perceptions on a personal level. These insights affirm that emotional dynamics and symbolic interpretations are critical dimensions of consumer behavior, particularly in digitally mediated environments. By capturing these subjective experiences, the study offers an enriched answer to the research question—one that would remain obscured in a purely quantitative or behaviorist framework.

The results align with and extend prior literature on AR in retail. While studies like those by (Fauzan & Jaroenwanit, 2024) have discussed AR’s role in increasing engagement and decision-making efficiency, they stop short of capturing the emotional interiority of such experiences. This study complements those findings by providing depth through a phenomenological lens, showing how consumers make sense of AR interactions not just cognitively but affectively. Furthermore, the findings resonate with the interpretative frameworks proposed by McLean and Wilson (2019), who emphasize the importance of perceived intimacy in shaping consumer attitudes. By foregrounding the lived experience, this study offers an integrative perspective that bridges the experiential gap often left by empirical generalizations.

The findings of this study carry several important implications for both academic inquiry and marketing practice. From a social and cultural perspective, the study demonstrates that AR experiences in fashion e-commerce are not merely transactional but emotionally situated and identity-relevant. These experiences offer consumers an avenue for self-exploration and self-presentation, highlighting the growing cultural expectation that technology should not only serve functionally but also emotionally and symbolically (Guiné dkk., 2020). For practitioners, these insights underscore the importance of designing AR experiences that are empathetic, responsive, and attuned to the emotional needs of users. A deeper understanding of how consumers feel and interpret AR interactions can guide the development of more meaningful, consumer-centric digital experiences that foster long-term brand loyalty.

Despite its valuable contributions, this study is not without limitations. The sample was relatively small and contextually bounded to young urban consumers familiar with AR technologies in fashion e-commerce, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other demographics or product categories (Pannhorst & Dost, 2019). Furthermore, the interpretative nature of phenomenological analysis is inherently shaped by the context in which meaning is constructed, making the findings rich but not necessarily universal. While the goal of phenomenology is not to generalize but to uncover deep meaning, future research may benefit from broader participant diversity or cross-cultural comparisons to explore how AR experiences vary across socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Future research could build on these insights by examining how emotional and symbolic responses to AR evolve over time or across different technological platforms. Longitudinal studies could explore whether repeated AR interactions strengthen or alter consumer-brand relationships in lasting ways (Naisa dkk., 2023). Additionally, future work could investigate how different consumer segments—such as older adults or individuals in emerging markets—engage with AR technologies, offering new perspectives on digital intimacy and consumer identity. Such extensions would not only deepen theoretical understanding but also support more inclusive and effective design of immersive marketing technologies.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how consumers emotionally experience Augmented Reality (AR) features in fashion e-commerce, focusing on the symbolic and affective meanings behind their interactions. The findings reveal that AR fosters digital intimacy, emotional engagement, and personal identity expression, shaping how consumers perceive and connect with brands. By using an interpretative phenomenological approach, this research addressed a critical gap in the literature, moving beyond surface-level metrics to uncover the essence of AR experiences. The study contributes a richer understanding of consumer-brand relationships in digitally mediated environments, offering valuable insights for both academic and marketing applications. While limited by sample size and contextual focus, the results lay the groundwork for future investigations into diverse consumer segments and evolving AR technologies. Further studies can expand this framework by exploring longitudinal impacts and cross-cultural dimensions of immersive consumer experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All funding sources have been acknowledged, and the research was conducted independently without influence from any commercial or institutional interests that could affect the objectivity or integrity of the findings.

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