



Exploring the Lived Experience of Augmented Reality in Online Fashion Shopping Among Young Consumers: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The rapid integration of immersive technologies in digital commerce has transformed how consumers interact with products in virtual environments. Within online fashion retail, Augmented Reality (AR) offers users simulated experiences of trying on clothing, yet little is known about how consumers subjectively experience this technology during initial encounters. Existing research has predominantly focused on adoption behavior, leaving a gap in understanding the emotional and perceptual meanings constructed by users during first-time AR interactions. This study employs an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore how consumers experience AR when shopping for fashion online for the first time. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 participants aged 18–35, data were analyzed through thematic interpretation guided by IPA principles to reveal key experiential dimensions. The results identified four central themes: immersive digital engagement, emotional oscillation between excitement and uncertainty, the development of digital trust, and the emergence of consumer empowerment. These findings highlight the psychological richness of AR use, extending beyond usability into areas of identity, trust, and perceived control. The study contributes new insights into how consumers make meaning through technology-mediated experiences and emphasizes the importance of designing AR interfaces that support user comfort and emotional connection. These findings not only deepen our theoretical understanding of digital consumer behavior but also suggest new pathways for future research on immersive retail experiences.



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INTRODUCTION

In the digital transformation era, consumer interaction with technology has redefined the boundaries of the shopping experience. E-commerce platforms have increasingly integrated immersive technologies such as Augmented Reality (AR) to simulate physical product engagement within virtual environments. This shift reflects a broader societal trend in which digital interfaces mediate everyday human experiences, particularly in consumption behavior. Within fashion retail, AR enables consumers to visualize clothing or accessories in personalized settings, effectively blurring the line between physical reality and digital simulation.

The growing use of AR in online shopping represents more than technological progress—it also constitutes a deeply human experience. For many users, a first encounter with AR evokes a mix of fascination, curiosity, and uncertainty. These emotional and cognitive responses are shaped by personal perception, social influence, and cultural familiarity with digital tools. Particularly among younger, tech-savvy generations, AR becomes more than a novelty. It functions as an experiential gateway to autonomy, self-expression, and the construction of digital identity. This underscores the experiential depth of AR-mediated interactions, which often escape the explanatory reach of traditional quantitative models.

While numerous studies have applied frameworks like TAM or UTAUT to assess AR adoption, these models tend to prioritize functional acceptance over experiential meaning. Such approaches offer limited insight into how individuals interpret and internalize AR technology on a subjective level. This study responds to that gap by focusing on the lived experiences of consumers as they engage with AR for the first time. A phenomenological approach is particularly well-suited to capturing the nuanced, affective, and often unspoken meanings embedded in these encounters.

By exploring how consumers assign meaning to AR interactions, this research aims to reveal how technology reshapes not only purchasing behavior, but also emotional perception, cognitive framing, and personal connection to products in digitally mediated spaces. Building upon the broader context of digital consumer interaction, the study of individuals' lived experiences in encountering new technologies has emerged as a critical domain within consumer behavior research. As consumers increasingly navigate hybrid environments that merge physical and virtual elements, their subjective responses emotional, perceptual, and cognitive form essential components of their engagement. The first-time use of Augmented Reality (AR) in online fashion shopping, in particular, presents a unique intersection of technology adoption and emotional immersion that warrants rigorous qualitative exploration.

However, previous studies exploring consumer responses to AR have primarily employed quantitative models such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) or the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). While these models offer valuable insights into behavioral intentions and perceived usefulness, they often overlook the depth and richness of personal meaning embedded in individual experiences. For example, research by Rese et al. (2020) emphasized virtual reality store acceptance but failed to capture the emotional ambivalence or perceptual tension present in real-time user interactions.

This methodological limitation reflects a broader challenge in the literature: conventional data collection and analysis approaches frequently fail to address the nuanced and evolving nature of consumer experience in immersive digital contexts. Quantitative instruments, by their structure, reduce complex feelings into predefined variables, thereby missing the dynamic, interpretive processes through which individuals make sense of unfamiliar technological encounters.

As a result, much of the existing research inadequately captures the essence of consumer experience with AR. This gap underscores the necessity for a phenomenological approach one that centers subjective reality, honors individual meaning-making, and reveals the hidden dimensions of how consumers engage with technology not only functionally, but experientially and existentially.

In addressing how consumers interact with Augmented Reality (AR) in online fashion shopping, existing studies have largely relied on established frameworks that emphasize functionality and intention, such as TAM and UTAUT models. These frameworks offer practical solutions by predicting consumer behavior based on quantifiable variables such as perceived ease of use, usefulness, or satisfaction. While effective in measuring adoption patterns at scale, they fall short in capturing the nuanced, affective, and interpretive dimensions of user experience that emerge during initial encounters with immersive technologies.

Such positivist approaches reduce complex experiences into simplified constructs, often neglecting the emotional ambiguity, perceptual dissonance, and evolving sense-making processes that consumers undergo in digitally augmented environments. For instance, while previous research has examined factors that influence AR adoption (Rauschnabel et al., 2022), little attention has been given to how consumers feel, interpret, and derive meaning from their first-hand interaction with AR interfaces particularly in contexts where visual realism challenges the boundaries of perception and trust.

This gap in the literature signals a critical need for a paradigm shift from measuring usage behavior to understanding experiential meaning. Phenomenology offers a compelling alternative by privileging the subjective voice of the individual and enabling a deeper exploration of how meaning is constructed in lived experience. Through this approach, it becomes possible to access the essential

structures of how consumers engage with AR technology not only as users, but as meaning-makers embedded in social, emotional, and cultural contexts.

Previous research has examined consumer interaction with AR through models that emphasize utility, usability, and behavioral intention. While such studies provide important insights into adoption patterns, they often fail to capture the emotional and interpretive depth of the user experience. A small but growing body of qualitative research has attempted to address this gap, but most remain exploratory and lack a structured phenomenological lens. Theories of embodied cognition and digital realism suggest that immersive experiences may reshape how users perceive authenticity and trust in digital settings. However, these insights require further investigation through methods that center the voices of participants and their personal interpretations.

To address this gap, this study applies an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore how consumers experience AR for the first time when shopping for fashion online. This method is chosen for its ability to uncover how participants make sense of unfamiliar technologies and the meanings they assign to those experiences. Through IPA, the study responds to the need for deeper understanding of how digital realism, emotional fluctuation, and personal identity interact during the AR shopping experience. The phenomenological method allows a holistic and human-centered examination of the subjective dimensions of consumer–technology interaction. This approach also offers new insights that complement and expand existing theories of consumer behavior in digital contexts.

This article is organized into six sections. The introduction presents the context, rationale, and guiding questions for the study. The next section outlines the phenomenological method and describes the participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. The results section highlights four emergent themes that reflect key experiential aspects of AR interaction. The discussion explores these themes in light of current literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings, their implications, and suggestions for future research in digital consumer experience.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of consumers using Augmented Reality (AR) for the first time in online fashion retail. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as it emphasizes the meaning-making process from the participant's perspective while acknowledging the role of interpretation in uncovering that meaning. This approach aligns with the study's objective of understanding how individuals subjectively experience and interpret their interaction with AR technologies in a digital consumer environment. Rooted in Heideggerian phenomenology, the design emphasizes contextual meaning, making it suitable for investigating complex emotional and perceptual responses during immersive digital shopping experiences.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had direct and meaningful experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged between 18 and 35, to have prior experience purchasing fashion products online, and to have used AR features at least once in a fashion e-commerce application. Individuals with professional experience in digital marketing, AR development, or related industries were excluded to ensure the authenticity of first-time user experiences. The final sample consisted of 12 participants (7 females and 5 males), with an average age of 24.3 years, all of whom resided in urban areas within a digitally literate demographic segment. Their backgrounds varied across student populations and young professionals.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an open-ended question framework designed to elicit rich, descriptive narratives. The interviews were conducted

face-to-face in quiet, familiar environments preferred by participants, including university study rooms and private café spaces. Each session lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis. To ensure participant comfort and openness, the interview protocol emphasized conversational flow, confidentiality, and psychological safety. Minor modifications were made to the interview guide based on a pilot interview to improve clarity and thematic alignment.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following a structured yet flexible process to identify emerging themes. The analysis began with multiple readings of each transcript to gain holistic familiarity, followed by the identification of significant meaning units. These units were coded and clustered into thematic categories based on patterns of shared experience. The process involved iterative interpretation to uncover latent meanings, while maintaining fidelity to participants' original expressions. NVivo software was used to assist in data organization and thematic mapping but did not dictate analytical outcomes. The final themes were derived through cross-case comparisons and distilled into core experiential insights.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was secured from all participants after the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures were fully explained. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms and the removal of identifiable information in transcripts and quotations. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with local data protection regulations throughout all phases of the research.

RESULTS

The data analysis yielded four central themes that captured the essence of participants' lived experiences when using Augmented Reality (AR) for the first time in online fashion shopping. These themes represent how users constructed meaning, navigated emotions, and engaged with digital representations of fashion items through AR. The following sections provide a narrative account of these themes supported by direct quotations from participants.

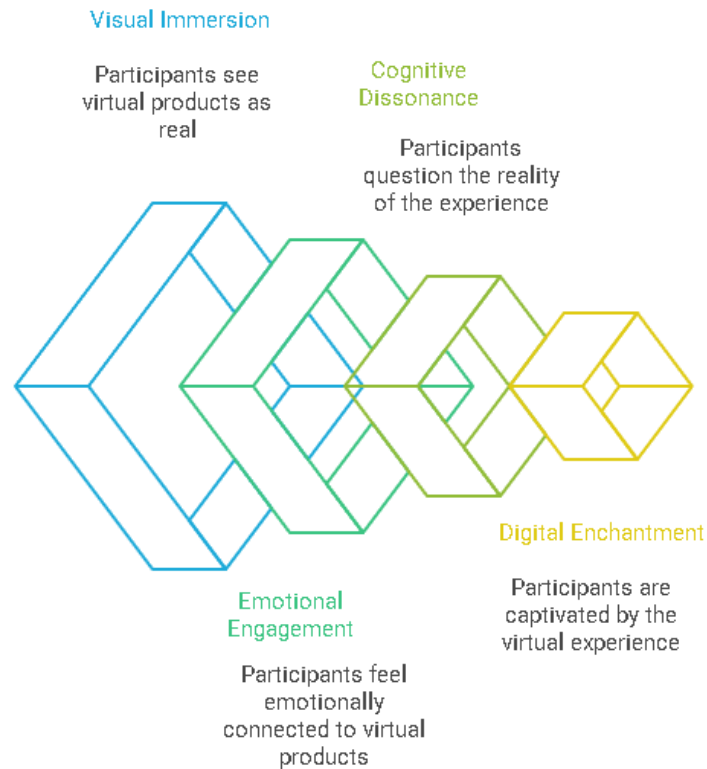
Immersion into a Surreal Shopping Environment

Participants described their initial experience with AR as "surreal" and "mind-bending," often expressing a sense of astonishment upon encountering a virtual yet seemingly tangible product interaction. This immersion was not merely visual, but deeply emotional, as participants attempted to reconcile the digital projection with their expectations of physical reality.

"It felt like the dress was really in front of me. I even moved around to see the side view, forgetting it was just my phone screen." (P3)

The boundary between reality and virtuality appeared momentarily suspended, leading some participants to express a sense of "digital enchantment." This immersive reaction was often accompanied by excitement, but also by cognitive dissonance as participants questioned the authenticity of what they were perceiving.

AR Shopping Experience Funnel



Emotional Oscillation Between Excitement and Uncertainty

A significant emotional fluctuation emerged as participants navigated their AR interaction. While the initial excitement was dominant, a sense of doubt and hesitation often followed, particularly regarding product trustworthiness.

“I was excited at first, like wow, I can try clothes without wearing them... but then I thought, ‘Is this really accurate?’” (P7)

Participants struggled with the gap between virtual representation and physical reality. Despite AR’s ability to simulate the product in a personal context, the inability to feel the texture or verify the fitting left some with unresolved uncertainty. This theme highlights the emotional ambivalence that characterized the AR shopping journey.

Constructing Digital Trust through Interactive Realism

Some participants articulated a gradual construction of trust in the digital interface, specifically when the AR experience was visually coherent and contextually personalized. Realism in motion, responsiveness, and environment-specific projection (e.g., seeing the outfit overlaid on their own image) contributed to their sense of product authenticity.

“It really helped to see the shoes on my own feet, even if just virtually. It made me more confident to buy.” (P5)

This trust, however, was conditional and depended on the quality of the AR execution. Participants who encountered technical glitches or visual delays reported a breakdown in perceived reliability and immediacy.

Redefining Shopping Agency and Consumer Empowerment

The integration of AR in online shopping introduced a novel sense of consumer autonomy. Participants expressed how they felt more in control of their decision-making, as AR allowed for experimentation without the pressure of salespersons or social judgment.

“I tried so many colors and styles just for fun... something I would never do in a store.” (P2)

This playful exploration became a meaningful part of the consumer experience, enabling not only product evaluation but also self-expression. The empowerment stemmed from the ability to visualize, adjust, and imagine oneself in various styles, thereby transforming passive browsing into active engagement.

The lived experiences of participants suggest that first-time use of AR in online fashion retail evokes a multi-layered emotional and perceptual journey marked by immersive excitement, cautious skepticism, developing digital trust, and enhanced agency. The meanings constructed by consumers reflect a dynamic negotiation between technological novelty and experiential authenticity. These findings form the phenomenological foundation upon which further interpretations are discussed in the next section.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that first-time use of Augmented Reality (AR) in online fashion shopping evokes a rich, multifaceted experience characterized by emotional immersion, perceptual dissonance, evolving trust, and increased consumer agency. These experiential dimensions directly address the central research question concerning how consumers make sense of their initial interactions with AR technology in a digital retail setting.

By uncovering the inner processes through which users construct meaning during their first AR shopping encounter, this study contributes a novel understanding of digital consumer behavior. Unlike existing frameworks that emphasize functionality and adoption metrics, this research highlights the affective and interpretive dimensions of AR engagement such as feelings of enchantment, doubt, trust, and empowerment. These dimensions not only shape consumer perception of the technology but also redefine their sense of control, identity, and decision-making in digital environments.

The findings align with and extend prior research on immersive technologies and digital realism. For instance, Poushneh and Vasquez-Parraga (2017) identified AR's role in enhancing product visualization but did not explore the emotional depth of that experience. Similarly, Hilken et al. (2017) noted consumer fascination with AR interfaces, though their study lacked a focus on the affective shifts and evolving trust documented here. This study complements and advances such work by employing a phenomenological lens to interpret the subtleties of consumer meaning-making, consistent with Heideggerian perspectives on lived experience and technology mediation.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the individual consumer and suggest broader cultural and professional considerations in the design and implementation of immersive retail technologies. The emotional oscillation and trust-building processes observed in this study indicate that first-time AR interactions are not merely technical events but socially and psychologically significant experiences. For marketers and digital platform designers, this means that technological efficacy alone is insufficient; the affective journey of the user must be carefully considered to build meaningful engagement. In cultural terms, the findings speak to a shifting relationship between humans and digital representations, where trust and authenticity are no longer confined to tangible experiences but are co-constructed in virtual spaces. These insights are particularly relevant for digital-native populations in emerging markets, where AR adoption intersects with identity, agency, and aspiration.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample was limited to young adult consumers with prior exposure to digital fashion commerce, which may influence the interpretative lens through which they experienced AR. Additionally, as with all phenomenological inquiries, the findings are context-bound and not intended for statistical generalization. The subjective depth gained through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) comes at the expense of breadth, which future studies could address by incorporating diverse demographic segments or longitudinal perspectives on consumer adaptation to AR over time.

Future research can build upon these findings by exploring cross-cultural differences in AR experience, particularly how sociocultural norms shape consumer trust and emotional response to virtual technologies. Studies could also examine how repeated AR use over time transforms the user's cognitive framework and consumer identity. Furthermore, integrating phenomenological insights with behavioral analytics may offer a holistic model for understanding how experiential meanings influence long-term adoption and loyalty in digital commerce ecosystems. These directions hold promise for advancing both theory and practice in the evolving intersection of technology, consumer behavior, and immersive experience.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how consumers experience Augmented Reality (AR) for the first time in the context of online fashion shopping. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered four key themes: immersive digital engagement, emotional oscillation, evolving trust, and consumer empowerment. These findings offer a deeper understanding of the emotional and perceptual meanings behind AR interaction, addressing gaps in previous research that focused primarily on adoption models and usability. Theoretically, this study emphasizes that AR shopping is not merely a functional activity but a complex experiential process that shapes consumer trust, identity, and decision-making. It contributes to the literature by highlighting the affective and interpretive dimensions of technology use, which are often overlooked in existing behavioral models.

Practically, the insights offer guidance for AR developers and e-commerce platforms seeking to optimize user engagement. Designers should prioritize emotionally intuitive interfaces that reduce uncertainty and enhance user control during initial interactions. Trust-building elements—such as guided tutorials, realistic product rendering, and personalized AR experiences—can help foster consumer confidence. Furthermore, embedding subtle cues that support identity expression (e.g., customizable avatars or social-sharing features) may increase emotional resonance and long-term adoption. Future research could expand on these findings by examining cultural variation, repeated AR use over time, or integrating phenomenological insights with behavioral data to enhance both theoretical frameworks and practical strategies in immersive digital commerce.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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