

Beyond the Lens: The Influence of Digital Fashion Illustration and Traditional Fashion Photography on Gen Z Visual Engagement and Purchase Intention

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Abstract

In the digital age, fashion is concerned not just with the clothes themselves but also with how they are seen. Since members of Generation Z are becoming more and more familiar with fashion through visual media, this study looks at the way in which digital fashion illustration and traditional fashion photography influence visual engagement and the intention to make a purchase. A survey was run with 108 people. The goal was to compare two visual styles. We looked at attention, look and feel, how well the clothing was understood, the urge to click, and what participants preferred for ads. Overall, the digital fashion illustrations held people's attention more. Traditional photographs still appear to be necessary since they contribute to the kind of realism needed in order to understand the clothing. The study suggests that combining creative illustration with realistic photography can create a more engaging way to communicate contemporary fashion.

IndexTerms: digital fashion illustration, traditional fashion photography, Generation Z, visual engagement, purchase intention, fashion communication, visual presentation.

Introduction

Fashion is not about clothes, it is also, about how those clothes are seen and how they make people feel. As fashion continues to go into the world of images pictures become an important way for fashion brands to communicate with customers. Pictures are the way fashion brands talk to customers. I think that from media posts, to online ads the way a garment is shown can change how pictures grab attention and spark interest for fashion brands (Baranwal & Roy,2021; El-Shihy & Awaad 2025).

Generation Z meets fashion through visual digital media. In digital media, pictures and social media posts help Generation Z find new brands, new trends and new items (Baranwal & Roy,2021; El-Shihy & Awaad 2025). Traditional fashion photography shows clothes in a way that lets Generation Z see how clothes look and how clothes can be styled. Does showing fashion with illustration of photography make people react differently? This study looks at how digital fashion illustration and traditional fashion photography affect engagement and purchase intention. The focus is, on attention, visual appeal, garment understanding click intention and advertising preference.

Background of the Study

1. Generation Z and the digital fashion environment

Fashion has evolved from being found solely in physical outlets and magazines to an environment where images, social media, and campaigns are significant tools in discovering clothing. Generation Z is especially influenced by the digital environment, created and available through social-media platforms, where the young consumer is faced with brands, inspiration, trends, and products. Research has found evidence on the influence of social-media marketing on brand perception and purchase intention of Generation Z consumers in the Fashion industry (Baranwal & Roy, 2021). Therefore, the way in which fashion is visually presented is key to effective communication. The garment is no longer experienced in a physical space but first interacted with through a screen.

2. Digital Fashion Illustration

Fashion illustration has always been an effective means through which fashion designers are able to communicate their concepts to the general public. This communication includes the design, the size, the colors, and the concept of the garment. I notice how fashion illustration has grown with technology becoming a flexible visual tool that shows fashion in a realm that goes beyond the actual clothing.

Digital fashion illustration lets designers play with color, size, layout, feelings and stories. It lets the designer explore ways to express emotion and narrative through fashion illustration. Digital illustration does not have to copy real clothes. It can reshape fashion in a way that fits one person's taste. Studies on digital illustration suggest that several parts matter for how viewers feel and what they take away. These include color choices, brush strokes, the human form, the setting, and the empty space around everything.

3. Traditional Fashion Photography

Fashion photography communicates fashion through a camera and the physical garment. Through the use of a camera, fashion photography represents the garment to an audience in a unique way depending on the stylist, setting, lighting, and model. Fashion photography has historically served both an artistic role. It gives the Fashion industry a tool to show a product, a brand or a concept to people, through images. In the age visual communication is the core of the Fashion industry. Now people see pictures of clothes before they touch the garment.

4. Why compare illustration and photography?

Illustration gives the designer a chance to change and redraw the clothing using color, creativity and feelings. Photography shows the clothing in a realistic way. The differences between the two are interesting when considering the impact of the visual presentation of the garment on the audience.

The comparison between the two methods can allow understanding the effect of differing visual presentations on the audience's attention, visual appeal of the garment, understanding of the product, click intention, and advertising preference. The comparison is relevant, given the importance of grabbing attention in the digital space through visual media.

5. Relevance of the study

Fashion brands are communicating with consumers in a digital space through visual media. Therefore, the relevance of this research is to understand how an audience would interact with illustration and photography. Understanding the audiences' responses to these media can further provide the Fashion industry with creative tools to effectively communicate products and brands.

This study will examine the relationship between digital fashion illustration and traditional fashion photography on Generation Z's visual engagement and purchase intention. The study will not consider one method as superior to the other but will explore the possibility that the two may provide alternative ways of visually representing the garment to an audience.

Research Question

What impact do fashion illustrations and traditional fashion photographs have on how people, in Generation Z look at images and decide to buy things especially when it comes to paying attention finding things visually pleasing understanding clothes wanting to click on something and preferring ads?

Objectives of Research

The objectives of the current research are:

- 1.To compare the visual interest generated through digital fashion illustration and fashion photography on the part of study participants.
- 2.To analyze the impact of digital fashion illustration and fashion photography on attention and visual appeal to the presentation of fashion.

3. To analyze the effects of both modes of presentation on the comprehension of the garment by the respondents.
4. To analyze the intention of respondents to click and their preference for advertisement via digital fashion illustration and fashion photography.
5. To investigate the role of digital fashion illustration and fashion photography in fashion communication and purchase intention.

Literature Review

The development of fashion communication in the digital era has been accompanied by changes in the medium of fashion communication. The use of social media platforms, digital campaigns, and online advertisement is making visual presentation increasingly more significant as a channel of fashion communication among consumers. While previous literature has looked into Generation Z fashion behavior, visual aesthetics, and digital imagery, there is less literature that compares fashion illustration through digital technology with fashion photography. Social media has played a major role in the way that Generation Z consumes and perceives fashion. Baranwal and Roy (2021) studied how social media marketing shapes the intent to buy in India's fashion market. They also noted that social media marketing matters for Gen Z. El-Shihy and Awaad (2025) worked with 643 Gen Z consumers. Their results suggested that fashion posts made by both brands and regular users can shift purchase intention. The look and feel of fashion visuals can change how people take in fashion content. Quijije-Alvarez and colleagues (2025) studied visual aesthetics, influencers, and electronic word-of-mouth. They focused on how these factors relate to purchase intention for Gen Z shoppers. Deng and others (2024) examined aesthetics, realism, personalization, and the way fashion is shown in virtual settings. They also explored how these elements connect to whether consumers accept virtual fashion. Hence, it is clear that the visual presentation of the fashion can play an important role in consumer response. Digital fashion illustration serves as an imaginative method of depicting fashion. This approach lets the artist work with color, layout, size, mood, and narrative. Eum and Yoo (2022) treated digital fashion illustration as a way to show feelings and tell stories using digital tools. Even so, there is still not much work that puts the two styles side by side.

Research Gap

While existing literature has investigated the use of visual communication in fashion by Generation Z and the use of fashion illustrations and photography, very little has been done on a direct comparison between fashion illustrations and fashion photography with respect to the areas of attention, aesthetic value, garment comprehension, click intentions, preference for advertisements, and purchase intention. This research aims to bridge this gap.

Perspective of the Researcher

Clothes do not just communicate themselves through their design, but through how they are presented. Through photography, clothes become more realistic, whereas digital illustration can make clothes into something much more through color, creativity, composition, and imagery.

This has made the researcher look at how the same fashion idea might elicit varying reactions based on their visual presentation. Rather than seeing photography and illustration as competing techniques, this study sees them as different languages of visuals. In this case, the research compares digital fashion illustration and fashion photography of Gen Z on attention, visual appeal, garment comprehension, click intention, advertising preference, and purchase intention.

Case Study: ONLY – “Tastes Like Style”

Campaign of ONLY – “Tastes Like Style” is a good case study of how fashion illustrations in digital form are used to showcase fashion visually. Designed for ONLY's denim line in cooperation with the visual storytelling studio Pastelstew, the campaign not only took the traditional way of presenting products, but combined denim fashion line with humorous food items like fries, shakes, and soft serves to create an interesting visual world (Pastelstew, 2025).

These visuals were used at various places like digital platforms such as social media stories and in-store screens to celebrate the launch of their seasonal collection. As per Pastelstew, the campaign resulted in more than 845,000 views which shows that people took interest in visuals used by them (Pastelstew, 2025).

In any event, however, the case study lacks sales figures and a controlled comparison of its effectiveness compared with conventional fashion photography (Pastelstew, 2025). Hence, the campaign cannot be used as proof of the ability of digital illustration to increase sales. Nevertheless, it shows how digital illustration can make a fashion product appear more imaginative (Pastelstew, 2025).

The case study is related to the current research in the sense that it is an example of using digital illustration as an instrument of fashion communication. It gives an insight into the type of visual representation discussed in this study and the impact of such images on the target audience.

Methodology

In this paper, a quantitative approach has been used to analyze the effect of digital fashion illustration and traditional fashion photography on visual engagement and purchase intention. Quantitative surveys are chosen for this research since surveys based on this approach allow collecting data related to measurable aspects of respondents' attitudes and perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection

In this research, a structured 15-question survey conducted using Google Forms was used. This survey gathered information about the use of social media by respondents, fashion discovery methods, preferences in visuals, and the role of visuals in engaging with fashion products. In terms of age diversity of respondents, Generation Z was the most frequent one among others, though some responses from those older than 29 were kept.

Visual Comparison

Two photographs of fashion outfits were picked from Pexels, taken by Anna Bondarenko and Pietro Henricky. Then, fashion illustrations were generated using the same photographs, thus providing four stimuli to compare: two photographs and two illustrations. The source of Pexels indicates that the photograph was taken by Pietro Henricky.

The images were labelled as Image A and Image B without mentioning at first which of them is a photograph and which one is an illustration. It enabled the respondents to focus on the images and to react to the pictures rather than to their format.

Measures and Analysis

Attention, visual appeal, garment recognition, clicking intention for the product and advertising preference, and general preference of the images were measured in the study. The application of digital fashion illustration in the marketing of fashion brands through social media was also investigated.

The collected 108 answers were then organized and analyzed for possible patterns in reactions to two types of the images.

Data Presentation

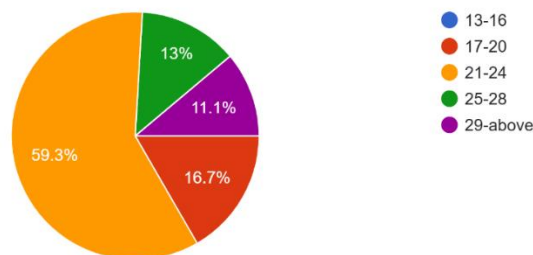
Data collected from 108 participants was analyzed in an attempt to understand their digital fashion behavior and reactions towards conventional fashion photography and digital fashion illustration. Findings from the study have been illustrated using charts and graphs below in terms of visual attention, attraction, garment interpretation, intention to click, ad preference, and visual preference.

Respondent Profile

1. Age of Respondents

59.3% of the respondents were in the 21–24 year age group, 16.7% were in the 17–20 year age group, 13% were in the 25–28 year age group and 11.1% were 29 years of age or older. There were no respondents in the 13–16 year age group.

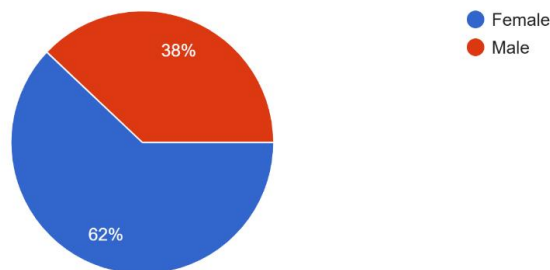
1. What is your age?
108 responses



2. Gender of Respondents

The group of respondents included 62 per cent who were female and 38 per cent who were male, which indicates that more women took part.

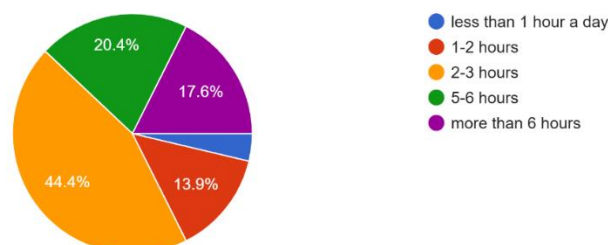
2. What is your gender?
108 responses



3. Social Media Usage

44.4% of the group said that they used social media for two to three hours each day. Approximately 20.4% used it for five to six hours and 17.6% used it for more than six hours, while a smaller number of respondents reported lower levels of usage.

3. How often do you use social media?
108 responses

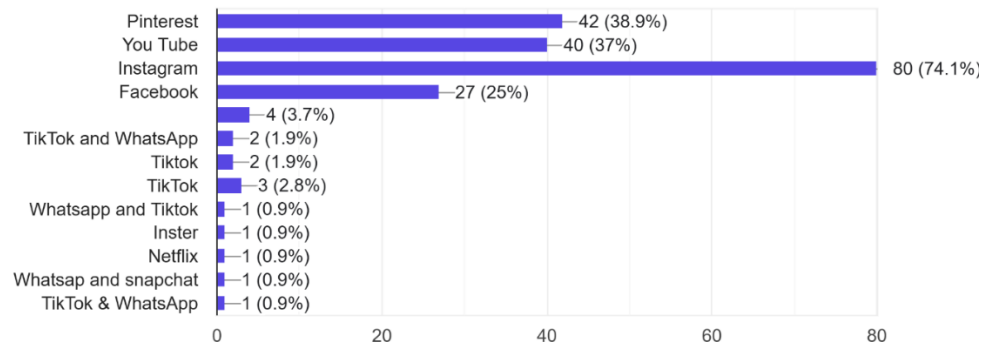


4. Platforms for Finding Fashion

The most used platform to discover fashion was Instagram with (74.1%) of respondents. Pinterest followed at (38.9%). (37%) used YouTube and (25%) used Facebook. Some also mentioned TikTok, Snapchat, Netflix and WhatsApp.

4. Which platforms do you use most often for discovering fashion?

108 responses

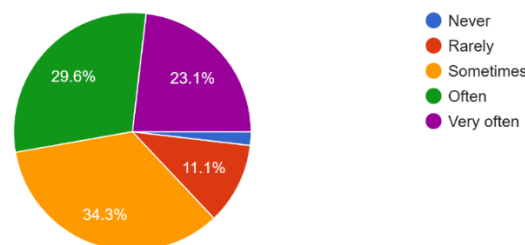


5. Fashion Detection Frequency via Social Media

Results indicate that 34.3% of the sample sometimes, 29.6% frequently, and 23.1% very frequently learn about new fashion brands through social media. Only 11.1% rarely or 1.9% never discover brands this way.

5. How often do you discover new fashion brands or clothing products through social media?

108 responses

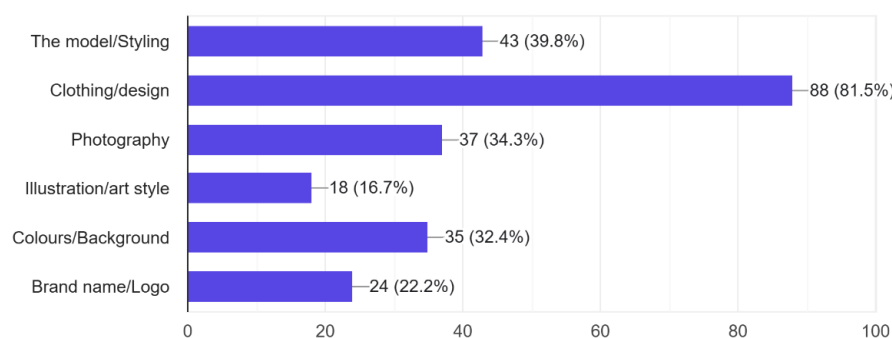


6. What Draws Attention to Fashion Posts

The results indicate that the most popular is clothing/design with (81.5%) of respondents opting for it. The next were model/styling (39.8%), photography (34.3%), colors/background (32.4%), brand name/logo (22.2%) and illustration/art style (16.7%).

6. What usually attracts your attention first when you see a fashion post?

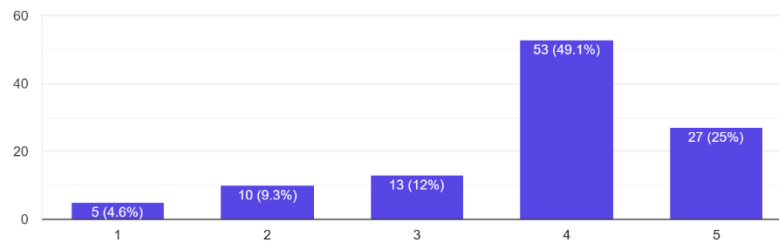
108 responses



7. Importance of Visuals in Online Fashion Shopping

The results indicate that visuals matter in online shopping for clothes. Visuals were rated as very important by 49.1% of respondents, and extremely important by 25%. Only 13.9% said visuals were slightly/not important.

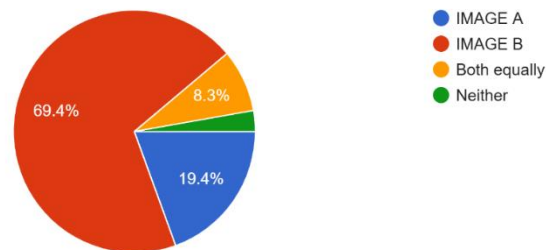
7. When shopping for clothes online, how important are visuals in your decision to explore a product?
108 responses



8. Which image first attracts your attention?

The results are clear and Favor Image B (digital fashion illustration) which attracted 69.4% of respondents' attention. In comparison, 19.4% chose Image A (traditional fashion photography), 8.3% said both were equally attention-grabbing and 2.8% said neither.

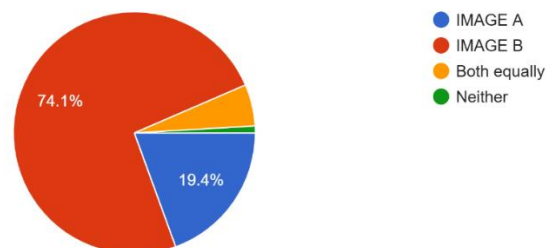
8. Which image catches your attention first?
108 responses



9. Which picture do you like to look at?

74.1% of the respondents thought image B (digital fashion illustration) was more visually appealing. 19.4% liked Image A (traditional fashion photography) better, 5.6% liked both images equally, and 0.9% liked neither.

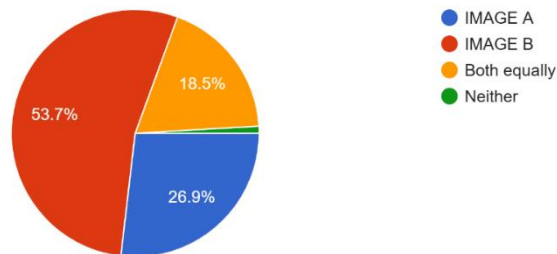
9. Which Image do you find more visually appealing?
108 responses



10. Which image makes a better sense of the garment?

It is seen from the findings that 53.7% of participants felt that Image B (digital fashion illustration) was a better way to understand the garment. On the other hand, 26.9% chose Image A (fashion photography), 18.5% felt both were equally effective, and 0.9% did not choose either.

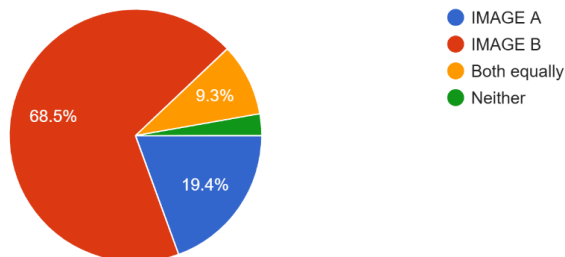
10. Which image gives you a better understanding of the actual garment?
108 responses



11. In case the fashion item appeared on the Internet, which image would encourage you to click on the item?

Image B (digital fashion illustration) was chosen by 68.5% as the one that would make participants click on the item. Image A was chosen by 19.4% of the sample, 9.3% chose both images equally, and 2.8% did not choose any image.

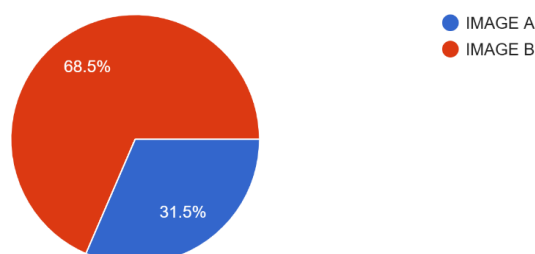
11. If you saw this fashion product online, which image would make you more likely to click on the product?
108 responses



12. If you could only select one picture for a fashion brand's social media ad, which would you choose?

The preferred choice was Image B (fashion illustration), as 68.5% chose it to be used for a fashion brand's social media ad, while 31.5% went for Image A (fashion photography).

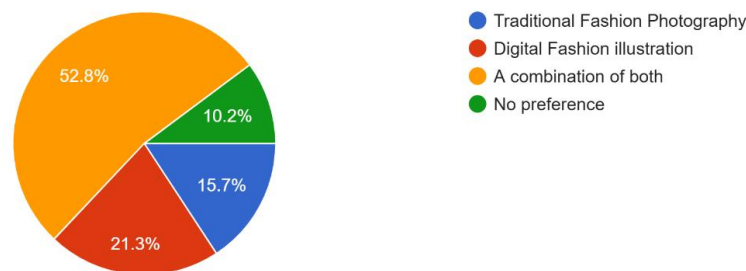
12. If you could only choose one image for a fashion brand's social media advertisement, which would you choose?
108 responses



13. Overall, what is your preference regarding fashion visuals?

The result shows that most respondents (52.8%) were of the opinion that traditional fashion photography coupled with digital fashion illustration was preferable. The next largest number of respondents (21.3%) indicated a preference for digital fashion illustration only, while 15.7% favoured traditional fashion photography, while 10.2% expressed no preference.

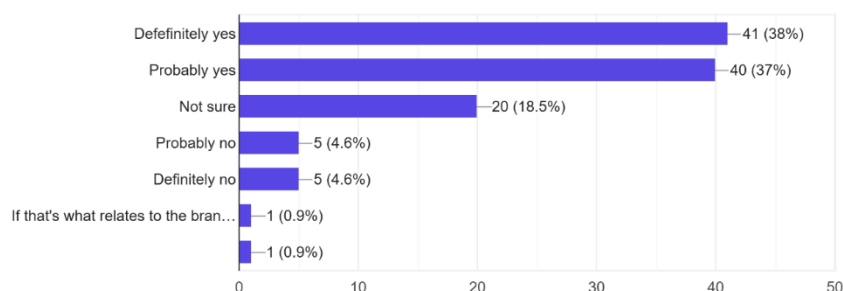
13. Overall which type of fashion visual do you prefer?
108 responses



14. Do you think fashion brands should adopt digital fashion illustration in their social media marketing campaigns?

The result of this question suggests a favourable response to digital fashion illustration in fashion marketing. While about 38% of the respondents answered yes, 37% gave an answer of probably yes, 18.5% gave a neutral response. Only 9.2% answered negatively.

14. In your opinion, should fashion brands use digital fashion illustration in their social media marketing?
108 responses



15. Further insights into fashion photography and digital fashion illustration

The further insights received indicated that many participants liked the **creativity and captivating nature of digital fashion illustration**, especially when it came to social media platforms. Many respondents also stressed the **relevance of realism and product accuracy**, where fashion photography offers a better sense of how the garment looks like in reality. A common opinion was that **using both fashion photography and digital illustration would offer the best results**, where illustration can be used to catch the attention of the customer and photography to inform about the product in a realistic way.

Results Discussion

Responses collected from the 108 participants reveal preference towards digital fashion illustration in several aspects of visual stimulation. Digital illustration attracted the attention of 69.4% of respondents and also appealed to the vision of 74.1% of them. Furthermore, there was an affirmative response towards click intentions, which showed that 68.5% of respondents would be more likely to click on a fashion product if it is illustrated in a visual way. Additionally, 68.5% chose digital illustration as their choice of visual for social media fashion brand advertisements.

It should be noted that the results do not indicate that traditional fashion photography is less significant. When it comes to garment understanding, 53.7% of respondents chose digital illustration, which is rather balanced response. The responses in the open-ended section revealed the importance of photography due to its realness and ability to show a garment on a model.

The general preference serves as the most reliable indicator of such a balance. 52.8% of the survey participants have expressed preference for the use of both photography and digital fashion illustration compared to just using one approach. This means that both techniques could play distinct roles in the design process; for instance, illustration may be used for creating visual appeal and attracting attention, while photography can help in providing a realistic depiction of the garment.

In conclusion, the results reveal that digital fashion illustration offers promising prospects in terms of visual attraction and fashion communication in a digital medium while photography plays an important role in providing a realistic depiction of the garment.

Interpretation of Results

The results describe the experience of fashion from before the garment is ever worn. In the case of the digital screen, the primary task is to attract the viewer's attention. In this research study, digital fashion illustration accomplished this goal more successfully than photography, receiving higher scores for attention, aesthetics, intention to click and preference for social media advertising.

Attracting attention, however, is not everything; the garment also has to convey information about its appearance. From the results, it can be concluded that photography still has its role to play in the field of fashion as it represents a realistic view of the garment.

The most compelling insight is derived from the respondents' tendency towards combining these two modes of visual presentation. Instead of having to choose between creativity and realism, the results indicate that the two can be compatible. The illustration can grab attention and generate visual narratives, whereas photography can make the item more tangible.

In conclusion, the digital fashion illustration can enhance visual engagement, and the conventional photography can help achieve a more realistic communication.

Implications of the Study

The results may be significant for fashion brands, designers, marketers and visual communicators operating in digital spaces. The better reaction to digital fashion illustration indicates that it may serve as a means to capture people's attention, to add visual interest and to engage with fashion.

On the other hand, traditional fashion photography still retains its value for providing the viewer with an authentic depiction of clothes. It means that fashion communication is able to balance creativity and authenticity. Illustration may attract attention and build visual narratives, whereas photography is able to give information about products.

The results also show that digital illustration goes beyond the limits of being merely the medium for development of design ideas. Digital illustration may be also useful for fashion storytelling, advertising and branding communication of fashion brands.

Limitations of the Study

There are many limitations in this study. First of all, the sample size was 108 people, where Generation Z comprised the majority, which means that the results may not be relevant for other age groups or consumers. Secondly, the research involved only a few visual stimuli, such as two fashion pictures with digital illustrations. Finally, the data was collected via online questionnaires, which implies that the results can be considered the expressed preferences of the participants and not the real-life actions.

Future Directions for Research

Future research might consist of a study involving a sample size larger and more diverse in order to get a better picture of how the various generations respond to fashion illustration vis-à-vis traditional photography. Future research might also compare fashion visuals from different brands and using different styles of illustration, in order to see if the results are replicable in other visual styles.

Future research could also use an approach based on observing actual purchases, not just the intention to click on or buy something, and future experiments might be conducted within social media sites and/or online shopping platforms.

Lastly, further research could investigate how factors such as brand identity, creativity, realism and visual storytelling affect consumer response to fashion visuals.

Conclusion

In this study, the effects of digital fashion illustration and fashion photography on visual engagement and purchase intentions in digital fashion communication were considered. The major result of the study is that digital fashion illustration demonstrates better possibilities for engaging attention and visual engagement, especially concerning visual appeal, click intention, and social media advertising preference.

At the same time, the results also indicate that traditional fashion photography continues being an important tool for realistic presentation of the garment. General preference for the combination of both formats suggests that creativity and reality are not mutually exclusive but can coexist.

Thus, digital fashion illustration is able to contribute to the expansion of fashion communication, which goes far beyond presenting the garment. It allows creating a visual narrative, attracting attention, and promoting engagement, while photography is responsible for connecting the visual content with the reality of the garment. Therefore, the main result of the study is not in replacing one tool with another but in their combination.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Materials for Visual Comparison

The following visual materials have been used in the questionnaire for comparing traditional fashion photography and digital fashion illustration.

Figure A1. Traditional Fashion Photograph 1

Original fashion photograph used as a visual stimulus.



Source: Bondarenko, A. (2021). *A model woman wearing casual clothing posing for a studio shoot* [Photograph]. Pexels. <https://www.pexels.com/photo/a-model-woman-wearing-casual-clothing-posing-for-a-studio-shoot-7161413/>

Figure A2. Digital Fashion Illustration 1

Digital fashion illustration based on the respective photograph.



Source: Created by the researcher based on Bondarenko (2021).

Figure B1. Traditional Fashion Photograph 2

Original fashion photograph used as a visual stimulus.



Source: Henricky, P. (2024). *Stylish urban fashion portrait in studio* [Photograph]. Pexels. <https://www.pexels.com/photo/stylish-urban-fashion-portrait-in-studio-28625806/>

Figure B2. Digital Fashion Illustration 2

Digital fashion illustration based on the respective photograph



Source: Created by the researcher based on Henricky (2024).

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