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Research Article

E-Commerce Narratives in Fashion Retail: A Qualitative Study of Industry Reports

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of e-commerce has fundamentally transformed the fashion retail industry, reshaping consumer behaviour, organisational strategies, and market structures. This study investigates how e-commerce is constructed and communicated through industry reports, treating these documents as influential discursive artefacts rather than neutral sources of information. Using a qualitative research design based on secondary data, the study analyses 25 industry reports published between 2018 and 2025. A thematic analysis reveals five dominant narratives: digital transformation as an inevitability, consumer-centricity as a strategic imperative, sustainability as a contested priority, technological innovation as a source of differentiation, and platformization as a structural shift. Drawing on narrative theory and institutional theory, the findings demonstrate that these narratives function as mechanisms of sensemaking and institutionalisation, shaping how organisations interpret trends and adopt strategies. The study also identifies tensions between growth-oriented e-commerce models and sustainability goals. By critically examining industry discourse, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how knowledge is constructed and disseminated in the fashion retail sector, offering implications for both scholars and practitioners.

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1. Introduction

The global fashion retail industry has experienced a paradigm shift with the rapid proliferation of e-commerce, fundamentally altering how products are marketed, distributed, and consumed. Historically rooted in physical retail spaces and seasonal cycles, the fashion sector has increasingly transitioned into a digitally mediated environment characterised by immediacy, personalisation, and global accessibility. The emergence of e-commerce platforms has not only expanded market reach but also redefined competitive dynamics, compelling both established brands and emerging designers to adapt to a highly fluid and technologically driven marketplace (Turban et al., 2021).

E-commerce in fashion retail extends beyond the simple digitisation of transactions; it represents a comprehensive transformation encompassing supply chain management, customer engagement, branding, and data analytics. The integration of digital tools such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and predictive analytics has enabled retailers to anticipate consumer preferences, optimise inventory, and enhance the overall shopping experience (Verhoef et al., 2021). As a result, the fashion industry has become increasingly data-centric, with decision-making processes heavily reliant on real-time insights derived from online consumer interactions.

In parallel with these technological advancements, consumer behaviour has undergone significant changes. Modern consumers are no longer passive recipients of fashion trends but active participants in the co-creation of value. Social media platforms, influencer marketing, and user-generated content have blurred the boundaries between producers and consumers, fostering a participatory culture that shapes brand narratives and purchasing decisions (Kim & Forsythe, 2009). The convenience of online shopping, coupled with the availability of extensive product information and peer reviews, has further accelerated the shift toward e-commerce as a primary mode of consumption.

Amid this transformation, industry reports have emerged as influential sources of knowledge and strategic guidance. Produced by consulting firms, market research organisations, and industry associations, these reports synthesise vast amounts of data and present it as narratives that interpret trends, identify opportunities, and recommend strategic actions. Unlike academic research, which often prioritises theoretical rigour, industry reports are designed to be actionable, offering insights that practitioners can readily apply. Consequently, they play a critical role in shaping how industry actors perceive and respond to the evolving landscape of e-commerce in fashion retail (Pollach, 2005).

However, the narratives embedded in these reports are not neutral representations of reality. Rather, they are constructed through selective framing, emphasising certain trends while downplaying others. This process of narrative construction is influenced by institutional norms, commercial interests, and the need to provide coherent and persuasive interpretations of complex phenomena. As such, industry reports can be understood as discursive artefacts that both reflect and shape the strategic priorities of the fashion industry.

Despite the growing importance of these narratives, there remains a significant gap in academic research concerning their content, structure, and implications. Existing studies on e-commerce in fashion retail have predominantly focused on quantitative analyses of consumer behaviour, technological adoption, and market performance (Hagberg et al., 2017). While these studies provide valuable insights, they do not adequately address the interpretive dimensions of industry discourse, particularly how narratives influence organisational decision-making and industry norms.

This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a qualitative analysis of industry reports to uncover the dominant narratives surrounding e-commerce in fashion retail. By examining how these narratives are constructed and disseminated, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the discursive mechanisms that underpin strategic thinking in the industry. The study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the dominant narratives about e-commerce in fashion retail as presented in industry reports?
- How do these narratives reflect broader technological, economic, and social transformations?
- What implications do these narratives have for the future development of the fashion retail sector?

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining insights from marketing, management, and communication studies to analyse industry discourse. By situating industry reports within a broader theoretical framework, the research contributes to the growing body of literature on digital transformation and organisational narratives. Furthermore, it offers practical implications for industry stakeholders, highlighting the need for critical engagement with the narratives that shape strategic decision-making.

In an era where information is abundant and rapidly disseminated, the ability to critically analyse and interpret industry narratives has become increasingly important. By shedding light on the discursive construction of e-commerce in fashion retail, this study aims to enhance our understanding of the complex interplay between technology, consumer behaviour, and organisational strategy.

2. Literature Review

The integration of e-commerce into fashion retail has fundamentally reshaped the industry's structure and operations. Early research on e-commerce emphasised its role in reducing transaction costs and increasing market efficiency (Laudon & Traver, 2020). However, in the context of fashion retail, e-commerce has evolved into a multifaceted phenomenon that influences not only economic transactions but also cultural and social practices.

Hagberg et al. (2017) conceptualise the digitalisation of retail as a process involving the transformation of value creation, customer interaction, and organisational structures. In fashion retail, this transformation is particularly pronounced due to the industry's reliance on visual aesthetics, trend cycles, and consumer engagement. E-commerce platforms enable retailers to present products through rich multimedia content, thereby enhancing the sensory experience of online shopping.

Moreover, the rise of direct-to-consumer (DTC) models has disrupted traditional supply chains by allowing brands to bypass intermediaries and establish direct relationships with customers (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019). This shift has significant implications for pricing strategies, brand positioning, and customer loyalty.

2.1 Digital Transformation and Technological Innovation

Digital transformation is a central theme in contemporary discussions of e-commerce in fashion retail. Verhoef et al. (2021) define digital transformation as the integration of digital technologies into all aspects of business operations, resulting in fundamental changes in how value is created and delivered. In the fashion industry, this transformation is driven by technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and cloud computing.

Artificial intelligence plays a crucial role in demand forecasting, personalisation, and inventory management. For example, recommendation algorithms analyse consumer data to suggest products that align with individual preferences, thereby enhancing customer satisfaction and increasing sales (Huang & Rust, 2021). Similarly, big data analytics enables retailers to identify emerging trends and respond to changes in consumer demand in real time.

Augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies have also gained prominence in fashion e-commerce, offering virtual try-on experiences that reduce uncertainty and improve purchase decisions (Javornik, 2016). These innovations not only enhance the customer experience but also contribute to operational efficiency by reducing return rates.

2.2 Consumer Behaviour in Online Fashion Retail

Understanding consumer behaviour is critical to the success of e-commerce in fashion retail. Online shopping behaviour is influenced by a range of factors, including perceived risk, trust, convenience, and social influence (Kim & Forsythe, 2009). The intangible nature of online shopping, particularly the inability to physically inspect products, presents unique challenges that retailers must address through effective communication and user experience design.

The rise of social media has significantly impacted consumer behaviour in fashion retail. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok serve as important channels for product discovery, brand engagement, and peer influence (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Influencers play a key role in shaping consumer perceptions and driving purchasing decisions, often blurring the line between marketing and personal recommendation.

Mobile commerce has further transformed consumer behaviour by enabling shopping anytime and anywhere. The widespread adoption of smartphones has led to an increase in impulse purchases and a preference for seamless, user-friendly interfaces (Grewal et al., 2020). As a result, retailers must prioritise mobile optimisation and integrate social commerce features into their platforms.

2.3 Sustainability and Ethical Considerations

Sustainability has become a critical issue in the fashion industry, driven by growing awareness of environmental and social impacts. The concept of fast fashion, characterised by rapid production cycles and low-cost garments, has been widely criticised for its contribution to environmental degradation and labour exploitation (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

E-commerce presents both opportunities and challenges for sustainability. On one hand, digital platforms can promote transparency by providing information about product origins, materials, and production processes. On the other hand, the convenience of online shopping can lead to overconsumption and increased waste, particularly in the form of returns and packaging (Vehmas et al., 2018).

Scholars have emphasised the need for sustainable business models that balance economic growth with environmental responsibility. Circular economy practices, such as recycling, resale, and rental services, are gaining traction as alternatives to traditional consumption patterns (Joy et al., 2012).

2.4 Omnichannel Retailing and Platform Ecosystems

The concept of omnichannel retailing has emerged as a key strategy for integrating online and offline channels. Verhoef et al. (2015) define omnichannel retailing as the seamless integration of multiple channels to provide a consistent customer experience. In the fashion industry, this involves combining physical stores, e-commerce platforms, and mobile applications.

Platform ecosystems play a central role in this integration. Major e-commerce platforms such as Amazon and Alibaba have created digital marketplaces that connect buyers and sellers, leveraging network effects to generate value (Parker et al., 2016). These platforms provide infrastructure, data analytics, and logistics support, enabling smaller brands to access global markets.

However, the dominance of large platforms also raises concerns about market concentration and power asymmetries. Smaller retailers may become dependent on these platforms, limiting their ability to differentiate and control customer relationships.

2.5 Industry Reports and Organisational Narratives

Industry reports are increasingly recognised as important sources of knowledge in business and management studies. Pollach (2005) argues that corporate and industry communications are not merely informational but also rhetorical, shaping perceptions and influencing behaviour. These reports construct narratives that frame issues, define priorities, and legitimise certain strategies.

Narrative theory provides a useful framework for analysing these texts, emphasising the role of storytelling in organisational sensemaking (Boje, 2008). In the context of fashion retail, industry reports often present e-commerce as an inevitable and transformative force, using narratives of innovation, disruption, and opportunity.

Institutional theory further explains how these narratives contribute to the diffusion of norms and practices across the industry (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). By promoting standardised interpretations of trends, industry reports encourage organisations to adopt similar strategies, thereby reinforcing institutional isomorphism.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts an integrative theoretical framework combining Narrative Theory and Institutional Theory to examine how e-commerce in fashion retail is constructed and communicated through industry reports. This dual-theoretical approach enables a nuanced understanding of both the discursive processes through which meaning is created and the institutional mechanisms through which such meanings are diffused and normalised across the industry.

3.1 Narrative Theory and Organisational Sensemaking

Narrative theory posits that individuals and organisations make sense of complex realities through storytelling (Boje, 2008). Narratives provide a structured way of organising information, linking events, and assigning meaning to phenomena that might otherwise appear fragmented or ambiguous. In organisational contexts, narratives are not merely descriptive but also performative, shaping perceptions, guiding actions, and influencing strategic decisions.

Industry reports, as key communicative artefacts, rely heavily on narrative structures to present insights coherently and persuasively. These narratives often follow recognisable patterns, such as framing e-commerce as a disruptive force, portraying digital transformation as inevitable, and emphasising innovation as a pathway to competitive advantage. Such storytelling techniques simplify complexity and make strategic recommendations more accessible to decision-makers (Vaara et al., 2016).

From a narrative perspective, the language used in industry reports is particularly significant. Terms such as “transformation,” “innovation,” and “consumer-centricity” are not neutral descriptors but carry normative implications that shape how organisations interpret their environments. By repeatedly invoking these concepts, industry reports contribute to the construction of a shared vocabulary that frames the discourse on e-commerce in fashion retail.

Furthermore, narratives often involve the selective inclusion and exclusion of information. This process of framing determines which issues are highlighted and which are marginalised, thereby influencing the priorities of industry actors (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). For example, while many reports emphasise the opportunities associated with e-commerce, they may downplay challenges such as environmental impact or labour concerns. This selective representation underscores the importance of critically analysing industry narratives rather than accepting them at face value.

3.2 Institutional Theory and Isomorphic Processes

Institutional theory provides a complementary lens for understanding how narratives disseminated through industry reports influence organisational behaviour. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), organisations operate within institutional environments characterised by shared norms, values, and expectations. To gain legitimacy, organisations often conform to these norms, leading to a process known as institutional isomorphism.

Three types of isomorphic pressures are particularly relevant in the context of fashion e-commerce:

- **Coercive Isomorphism:** Arises from regulatory requirements and external pressures. For example, sustainability regulations may compel fashion retailers to adopt environmentally friendly practices.
- **Normative Isomorphism:** Stems from professional standards and industry norms, often reinforced through reports and best-practice guidelines.
- **Mimetic Isomorphism:** Occurs when organisations imitate successful competitors, particularly in uncertain environments.

Industry reports play a crucial role in facilitating these processes by presenting certain strategies and practices as normative or desirable. For instance, the widespread emphasis on omnichannel retailing and digital transformation in industry reports encourages firms to adopt similar approaches, thereby reinforcing homogeneity within the industry.

Institutional theory also highlights the role of legitimacy in organisational decision-making. By aligning their strategies with the narratives promoted in industry reports, organisations can signal their adherence to industry norms and enhance their credibility among stakeholders (Suchman, 1995). This is particularly important in the fashion industry, where brand reputation and consumer trust are critical determinants of success.

3.3 Discursive Institutionalism and the Role of Communication

To further enrich the analysis, this study draws on the concept of discursive institutionalism, which emphasises the role of discourse in shaping institutional processes (Schmidt, 2008). Unlike traditional institutional theory, which focuses primarily on structures and practices, discursive institutionalism highlights how ideas and narratives are communicated, contested, and institutionalised.

In this context, industry reports can be seen as vehicles for the dissemination of ideas that influence both cognitive and normative dimensions of organisational behaviour. They provide interpretive frameworks that help organisations understand their environments and justify their strategic choices. At the same time, they contribute to the formation of collective beliefs about what constitutes effective and legitimate practices in fashion e-commerce.

3.4 Integrative Conceptual Model

By integrating narrative theory and institutional theory, this study conceptualises industry reports as discursive artefacts that operate at the intersection of meaning-making and institutionalisation. Narratives constructed within these reports shape how e-commerce is understood, while institutional mechanisms facilitate the diffusion and normalisation of these interpretations across the industry.

This integrative framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of both the content and the impact of industry narratives. It acknowledges that industry reports are not passive reflections of reality but active agents in the construction of knowledge and the shaping of organisational behaviour.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism is particularly suitable for examining narratives and discourse, as it emphasises the subjective construction of meaning and the importance of context in shaping understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than seeking to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships, the study aims to explore how e-commerce in fashion retail is framed and interpreted within industry reports.

The research design is exploratory and descriptive, focusing on uncovering patterns and themes in the narratives presented in these reports. This approach is appropriate given the limited existing research on the discursive dimensions of industry reports in the fashion sector.

4.1 Data Source and Sampling Strategy

The study relies on **secondary data**, specifically industry reports published by leading consulting firms, market research organisations, and industry associations. Secondary data analysis offers several advantages, including access to a wide range of information and the ability to examine longitudinal trends (Johnston, 2017).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 25 industry reports published between 2018 and 2025. The selection criteria included:

- Relevance to e-commerce in fashion retail
- Credibility of the publishing organisation
- Global scope and influence
- Availability of comprehensive qualitative and quantitative insights

Organisations such as McKinsey & Company, Deloitte, PwC, Bain & Company, and Euromonitor International were prioritised due to their established reputation and widespread use by industry practitioners.

4.2 Data Collection Procedures

The reports were collected from publicly accessible databases, corporate websites, and academic repositories. Each report was carefully reviewed to ensure its relevance and quality. The final dataset comprised a diverse range of documents, including annual industry outlooks, thematic analyses, and strategic white papers.

To facilitate systematic analysis, all reports were converted into a standardised digital format and imported into qualitative data analysis software. This enabled efficient coding, categorisation, and retrieval of textual data.

4.3 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

The study employs **thematic analysis**, a widely used method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed a six-phase process:

- **Familiarisation with the Data:** The researcher conducted multiple readings of the reports to gain an in-depth understanding of their content and structure.
- **Initial Coding:** Key phrases, concepts, and recurring ideas were systematically coded. Both inductive and deductive coding approaches were used, allowing themes to emerge from the data while also being informed by the theoretical framework.
- **Theme Development:** Codes were grouped into broader themes representing dominant narratives, such as digital transformation, consumer-centricity, and sustainability.
- **Review of Themes:** Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and distinctiveness.
- **Definition and Naming of Themes:** Each theme was clearly defined and linked to the research questions and theoretical framework.
- **Interpretation:** The final stage involved interpreting the themes in relation to narrative and institutional theories, highlighting their implications for fashion retail.

4.4 Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigour

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, the study adopts several strategies:

- **Triangulation:** Data from multiple sources were analysed to ensure consistency and reduce bias.
- **Transparency:** The coding process and analytical procedures were documented in detail to allow for replication.
- **Reflexivity:** The researcher maintained a reflexive stance, acknowledging potential biases and their influence on interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- **Thick Description:** Detailed descriptions of themes and narratives were provided to enhance the richness and validity of the analysis.

4.5 Limitations of the Methodology

While the use of secondary data provides valuable insights, it also presents certain limitations. Industry reports are often produced for commercial purposes and may reflect the interests and perspectives of their authors. As such, they may not provide a fully objective representation of the industry.

Additionally, the reliance on publicly available reports may exclude proprietary or confidential information that could offer deeper insights. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data, such as interviews with industry professionals.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical research practices by using publicly available data and properly acknowledging all sources (Mannan & Farhana, 2026). As no human participants were involved, issues related to informed consent and confidentiality were not applicable.

5. Findings and Analysis

The thematic analysis of 25 industry reports reveals that e-commerce narratives in fashion retail are not merely descriptive accounts of technological change but are structured discourses that shape industry understanding and strategic direction. Five dominant narratives emerge consistently across the dataset: digital transformation as inevitability, consumer-centricity as strategic imperative, sustainability as contested priority, technological innovation as differentiation, and platformization as structural reconfiguration. These narratives are interrelated and collectively construct a coherent vision of the future of fashion retail.

5.1 Digital Transformation as an Inevitable Imperative

One of the most pervasive narratives identified in the industry reports is the framing of digital transformation as both inevitable and urgent. E-commerce is portrayed not as an optional strategic choice but as a fundamental requirement for survival in an increasingly competitive market. This narrative is characterised by a sense of urgency, often articulated through language emphasising disruption, acceleration, and transformation.

Reports frequently highlight the rapid pace of technological change and the need for organisations to adapt quickly to remain relevant. For example, digital tools such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and predictive analytics are presented as essential components of modern retail operations (Verhoef et al., 2021). These technologies enable firms to optimise inventory, forecast demand, and personalise customer experiences, thereby enhancing efficiency and competitiveness.

From a narrative perspective, this framing simplifies the complexity of digital transformation by presenting it as a linear and necessary progression. However, it also obscures the challenges and risks associated with technological adoption, such as high implementation costs, organisational resistance, and data privacy concerns. By emphasising inevitability, industry reports contribute to a form of normative pressure that encourages firms to adopt digital strategies, aligning with the concept of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Moreover, this narrative often positions early adopters as exemplars of success, reinforcing mimetic behaviour among other firms. The repeated emphasis on "digital leaders" and "laggards" creates a dichotomy that further intensifies the perceived need for transformation.

5.2 Consumer-Centricity as a Strategic Imperative

A second dominant narrative centres on the shift toward consumer-centric business models. Industry reports consistently emphasise the importance of understanding and responding to evolving consumer preferences, particularly in the context of online shopping environments.

This narrative reflects broader changes in consumer behaviour, including increased demand for convenience, personalisation, and seamless experiences across channels (Grewal et al., 2020). Data analytics is frequently highlighted as a key enabler of consumer-centricity, allowing firms to collect and analyse large volumes of customer data to generate insights and tailor offerings.

The narrative also underscores the role of social media and digital platforms in shaping consumer preferences. Influencer marketing, user-generated content, and social commerce are presented as critical tools for engaging with consumers and building brand loyalty (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). These developments have transformed consumers from passive recipients of marketing messages into active participants in the co-creation of value.

However, the emphasis on consumer-centricity also raises important questions about data privacy and ethical considerations. While industry reports celebrate the potential of data-driven personalisation, they often overlook the risks associated with data collection and usage. This selective framing highlights the need for a more balanced understanding of consumer-centric strategies.

5.3 Sustainability as a Contested and Ambivalent Narrative

Sustainability emerges as a prominent yet complex narrative within industry reports. On one hand, sustainability is framed as a moral and strategic imperative, driven by increasing consumer awareness and regulatory pressures. Reports highlight the environmental impact of fast fashion and advocate for more sustainable practices, such as the use of eco-friendly materials and circular business models (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

On the other hand, sustainability is often positioned in tension with the growth-oriented nature of e-commerce. The convenience and accessibility of online shopping can lead to overconsumption, increased returns, and greater environmental impact due to packaging and logistics (Vehmas et al., 2018). This contradiction is rarely addressed explicitly in industry reports, which tend to present sustainability initiatives in a positive light without critically examining their limitations.

The ambivalence of this narrative reflects broader tensions within the fashion industry, where economic and environmental objectives are often in conflict. From an institutional perspective, sustainability can be seen as a source of coercive and normative pressure, as firms seek to align with regulatory requirements and societal expectations (Suchman, 1995).

5.4 Technological Innovation as a Source of Differentiation

Technological innovation is another key narrative, often framed as a source of competitive advantage and differentiation. Industry reports highlight a range of emerging technologies, including augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and blockchain, as tools for enhancing customer experiences and improving operational efficiency.

For example, AR-enabled virtual try-on features are presented as solutions to the challenges of online shopping, allowing consumers to visualise products before making a purchase (Javornik, 2016). Similarly, blockchain technology is discussed in the context of supply chain transparency and authenticity verification.

This narrative emphasises the role of innovation in creating unique value propositions and differentiating brands in a crowded marketplace. However, it also reflects a degree of technological determinism, suggesting that innovation alone can drive success. This perspective may overlook the importance of organisational capabilities, strategic alignment, and customer trust in the effective implementation of new technologies.

5.5 Platformization and the Reconfiguration of Market Structures

The rise of digital platforms represents a significant structural shift in the fashion retail industry. Industry reports frequently highlight the growing dominance of large e-commerce platforms and the increasing importance of marketplace models.

Platformization is framed as a process of ecosystem creation, where value is generated through network effects and data integration (Parker et al., 2016). Platforms such as Amazon and Alibaba are portrayed as central actors in the global retail landscape, providing infrastructure, logistics, and access to a vast customer base.

While this narrative emphasises the opportunities associated with platform participation, it also raises concerns about market concentration and power asymmetries. Smaller brands may become dependent on dominant platforms, limiting their ability to control customer relationships and differentiate their offerings.

From an institutional perspective, platformization contributes to the standardisation of practices and the diffusion of norms across the industry. By aligning with platform ecosystems, firms adopt similar strategies and operational models, reinforcing institutional homogeneity.

Collectively, these narratives construct a vision of e-commerce in fashion retail that is characterised by transformation, innovation, and growth. However, they also reveal underlying tensions and contradictions, particularly in relation to sustainability and technological adoption. By framing certain trends as inevitable and desirable, industry reports play a crucial role in shaping the strategic priorities and practices of fashion retailers.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the central role of industry reports as discursive instruments that shape the understanding and practice of e-commerce in fashion retail. By constructing and disseminating narratives, these reports influence how organisations interpret their environments, make strategic decisions, and align with institutional norms. This section discusses the implications of these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and broader literature.

6.1 Narratives as Mechanisms of Sensemaking

Consistent with narrative theory, the findings demonstrate that industry reports function as tools for organisational sensemaking. In a rapidly changing environment characterised by technological innovation and shifting consumer behaviour, narratives provide a means of simplifying complexity and creating coherent interpretations (Boje, 2008).

The framing of digital transformation as inevitable, for example, helps organisations make sense of the disruptive impact of e-commerce. By presenting transformation as a linear and necessary process, industry reports reduce uncertainty and provide clear guidance for action. However, this simplification may also obscure alternative perspectives and limit critical reflection.

Similarly, the narrative of consumer-centricity reinforces the importance of customer-focused strategies, aligning with existing research on the role of customer experience in retail success (Grewal et al., 2020). By emphasising the centrality of the consumer, industry reports encourage organisations to prioritise data analytics and personalisation.

6.2 Institutionalisation of Strategic Practices

From an institutional perspective, the narratives identified in this study contribute to the diffusion and normalisation of specific practices within the fashion industry. By promoting certain strategies as best practices, industry reports create normative expectations that influence organisational behaviour (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

For example, the widespread emphasis on omnichannel retailing and digital transformation has led to the adoption of similar strategies across firms, resulting in increased homogeneity. This process of institutional isomorphism is further reinforced by mimetic behaviour, as organisations imitate successful competitors.

The role of legitimacy is also evident in the adoption of sustainability initiatives. By aligning with sustainability narratives, firms can enhance their reputation and demonstrate their commitment to social and environmental responsibility (Suchman, 1995). However, the selective framing of sustainability in industry reports may lead to superficial or symbolic adoption of practices, rather than substantive change.

6.3 Tensions and Contradictions in E-Commerce Narratives

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the identification of tensions and contradictions within e-commerce narratives. The coexistence of growth-oriented and sustainability-oriented narratives reflects broader challenges in balancing economic and environmental objectives.

While industry reports advocate for sustainable practices, they also emphasise the importance of scaling operations and increasing sales. This dual emphasis creates a tension that is not fully resolved within the narratives. As a result, sustainability initiatives may be framed as complementary to growth, even when they involve trade-offs.

Similarly, the narrative of technological innovation as a panacea for industry challenges may overlook the complexities of implementation. While technologies such as AR and AI offer significant potential, their effectiveness depends on factors such as organisational capabilities, customer acceptance, and ethical considerations (Huang & Rust, 2021).

6.4 Power Dynamics and Platformization

The narrative of platformization highlights the changing power dynamics within the fashion retail industry. The dominance of large e-commerce platforms has significant implications for competition, innovation, and value distribution.

From a theoretical perspective, platformization can be understood as a form of institutional restructuring, where new actors and relationships redefine the boundaries of the industry (Parker et al., 2016). Industry reports play a role in legitimising this shift by framing platforms as essential components of the retail ecosystem.

However, this narrative may also obscure the challenges associated with platform dependency, including reduced autonomy and increased competition. Smaller firms may struggle to differentiate themselves within platform environments, leading to commoditization and margin pressures.

6.5 Contributions to Theory and Practice

This study contributes to the literature by integrating narrative and institutional perspectives to analyse industry discourse. It demonstrates that industry reports are not merely sources of information but active agents in the construction of knowledge and the shaping of organisational behaviour.

For practitioners, the findings highlight the importance of critically engaging with industry narratives. While these narratives provide valuable insights, they should not be accepted uncritically. Organisations must consider their specific contexts and capabilities when adopting strategies.

6.6 Directions for Future Research

Future research could build on this study by incorporating primary data, such as interviews with industry professionals, to explore how narratives are interpreted and applied in practice. Additionally, comparative studies across different regions or sectors could provide further insights into the variability of e-commerce narratives.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how e-commerce in fashion retail is framed and interpreted through industry reports, with a particular focus on the narratives that shape organisational understanding and strategic action. By employing a qualitative thematic analysis of secondary data, the research identified five dominant narratives-digital transformation, consumer-centricity, sustainability, technological innovation, and platformization-that collectively construct a coherent yet complex vision of the industry's evolution.

The findings highlight that industry reports function not merely as repositories of information but as powerful discursive instruments that influence how organisations perceive and respond to change. Through the lens of narrative theory, these reports can be understood as mechanisms of sensemaking, simplifying complex phenomena and providing structured interpretations that guide decision-making. At the same time, institutional theory reveals how these narratives contribute to the diffusion of norms and practices, encouraging organisations to adopt similar strategies in pursuit of legitimacy and competitiveness.

A key contribution of this study lies in its identification of inherent tensions within these narratives. In particular, the coexistence of growth-oriented e-commerce strategies and sustainability objectives reflects a broader contradiction within the fashion industry. While industry reports frequently advocate for environmentally responsible practices, they also emphasise expansion, efficiency, and increased consumption, creating a paradox that remains insufficiently addressed. Similarly, the emphasis on technological innovation as a universal solution may overlook the organisational and ethical complexities associated with its implementation.

From a practical perspective, the study underscores the importance for fashion retailers and stakeholders to engage critically with industry narratives. Rather than adopting recommended strategies uncritically, organisations should consider their specific contexts, capabilities, and long-term objectives. This approach is especially important in navigating the challenges associated with platform dependency, data privacy, and sustainable development.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the academic literature by integrating narrative and institutional perspectives to analyse industry discourse in fashion retail. It also opens avenues for future research, particularly in exploring how these narratives are interpreted and enacted in practice. As e-commerce continues to evolve, understanding the narratives that shape its development will remain essential for both theoretical advancement and practical innovation.

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