



Why do Consumers Return Products?: A Qualitative Analysis of Online Product Return Behavior of Fashion Industry Special Reference to Young Female Consumers in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

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E-commerce is growing rapidly worldwide, and it saw a significant increase in Sri Lanka after the COVID-19 pandemic. The fashion industry is a key sector that sells products online through platforms like social media and websites. Online product returns are relatively new in Sri Lanka; therefore, researchers used qualitative methods to study this phenomenon. They identified factors influencing online returns among young Gen Z women in Sri Lanka and examined fraudulent practices by consumers when returning fashion products. To gather data, the researchers conducted 10 in-depth interviews with sellers and 10 interviews with buyers. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the respondents, and the content analysis method was used to analyze the interview data. The phenomenological approach is used in this study to understand the experiences and views of young consumers on online product returns. The researchers categorized the factors influencing product returns into three main headings: customer requirement mismatch, cultural beliefs of customers, and late deliveries. They also uncovered fraudulent practices by consumers, such as intentionally damaging products, leaving bad reviews, refusing to pay for delivery, placing orders without upfront payment, and failing to purchase the product. Additionally, the researchers collected customer recommendations for online fashion retailers to reduce product returns. The findings of this study provide valuable insights to help online fashion retailers better understand customer expectations and minimize product returns.

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1. Introduction

The growth of E-commerce is driving an upsurge in online buying among consumers. Retail e-commerce sales are predicted to top 6.3 trillion US dollars globally by 2024, and this amount is expected to rise further in future years (Statista, 2024). E-commerce is simply defined as the process of purchasing, selling, and exchanging things, services, and information using computer networks and the Internet (Turban et al., 2004). In comparison to traditional the retail sector, online retailers offer lower prices, a broader selection, and a more convenient shopping experience (Saarijarvi et al., 2017). As a result, many people are now embracing online shopping.

E-commerce in Sri Lanka has developed dramatically as more people utilize the internet and smart devices, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (International Trade Administration, 2024). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, Sri Lankan consumers shifted their purchasing habits and preferred ordering products through online platforms. Online purchasing is getting increasingly popular among Sri Lankan Consumers. More crucially, the fashion industry has shifted to online platforms. The Sri Lankan Fashion e-commerce industry is expected to be worth US\$456.4 million by 2024, accounting for 18.9% of the total e-commerce market in Sri Lanka (ECDB,2024). Therefore, it is clear that a significant portion of fashionwear sales have transferred to online channels.

According to the rationale provided in the preceding paragraph, Sri Lankan fashion consumers prefer to purchase things through online platforms. Managing online sales is an important and difficult task for firms. Due to the customizability of the fashion items, the number of returns is significantly high (Saarijarvi et al., 2017). "Product return' is an activity initiated by consumers, which involves taking back the previously purchased product to its source and successively receiving either a refund within the original type of payment, exchange for one more item, or store credit" (Ambilkar et al. ,2022).

Researchers have discovered the phenomenon of young customer behavior in product returns, but it has not been fully investigated (Das & Kunja, 2024). Women are more likely to purchase and wear new fashions than males and they also influence others to do the same (Workman &, Lee 2011). Therefore, the researchers chose to collect the data from the young female consumers (Gen Z consumers). Furthermore, the available studies related to online product returns are done in developed economies like the USA, China (Wang et al.,2019), and Australia (Foscht et al., 2013). In addition to that, there are notable differences in online return and consumption behavior across demographics (Das & Kunja, 2024). Therefore, the findings of other contexts do not apply to the Sri Lankan setting. Geographically, the Western Province of Sri Lanka is the largest e-commerce market in Sri Lanka, accounting for almost 50% of total orders (International Trade Administration, 2024). Therefore, the researchers chose the western province of Sri Lanka to collect the data. This research revealed the key factors influencing the online product return behavior of young female consumers in Sri Lanka.

Therefore, there is a research avenue for Sri Lankan researchers to research the product return behavior of Sri Lankans. Consumers' fraudulent online return practices are increasing these days, and there is a lack of research on the subject (Ulku & Gurler, 2018). Therefore, in this study, the researchers uncovered fraudulent customer practices during the online return procedure from the perspective of online fashion retailers and young female fashion consumers.

2. Literature Review

Online Fashion Industry in Sri Lanka

Nowadays, e-commerce plays an important role in the fashion sector. E-commerce in Sri Lanka has developed dramatically as more people utilize the internet and smart devices, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (International Trade Administration, 2024). Online shopping is becoming increasingly popular for fashion goods, and it's a growing industry. "According to Statista, the e-commerce fashion industry's compound annual growth rate (CAGR) is tipped to grow 14.2% between 2017 and 2025, with the industry hitting a \$1 trillion valuation by 2024" (Micheal, 2024). The Sri Lankan Fashion e-commerce industry is expected to be worth US\$456.4 million by 2024, accounting for 18.9% of the total e-commerce market in Sri Lanka (ECDB,2024). Therefore, it is clear that the Sri Lankan fashion industry contributes significantly to E-commerce.

Theoretical Background

According to cognitive dissonance theory, psychological tension occurs when an individual's action contradicts their opinions and beliefs (Festinger,1957). Therefore, the customer tends to return the product if there is a difference between the actual product performance and the expected product performance. This theory is important in explaining consumer product return behavior when there is a gap between their expectations and beliefs about the actual product performance and the expected product performance (Grace et al., 2022). Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior suggests that intent is influenced by three factors: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. The intention leads to the consumer's behavior. If a customer believes they should return a product, they will do so, even if the product performs well.

Social Media and the Fashion Industry

Social media platforms are well-established channels for fashion retail stores to increase their visibility to their target audience because social media platforms are new communication mechanisms between consumers and retailers. Moreover, Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have become a new source of inspiration for Factionists (Ahamed et al., 2015). Many fashion designers and buyers communicate with one another through these social media channels. More importantly, Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are key influencing factors for young consumers, particularly Generation Z (Sariffodeen, 2024). The purchase decisions of young consumers are directly influenced by social media platforms. Fashion is one industry that is thought to be well-suited to social networking. Social media and the fashion industry are

interdependent with each other (Ahamed et al., 2015). Fashion retailers can utilize social media to communicate with current consumers and attract new customers to their brands.

Online Product Returns and the Fashion Industry

“Product return’ is an activity initiated by consumers, which involves taking back the previously purchased product to its source and successively receiving either a refund within the original type of payment, exchange for one more item, or store credit” (Ambilkar et al., 2022). Today, online sales are both crucial and troubling for retailers. Consumer online product returns are a major issue for businesses, and this has become a major challenge for both large and smaller businesses specifically for the fashion industry (Saarijarvi et al., 2017). Product return behavior can be divided into three categories: planned, eager, and educational returners (Foscht et al., 2013; Wachter et al., 2012). Planned or unethical returners purposefully return the product; eager returners feel pleased after completing the return process; and reluctant or educated returners feel guilty about their return. Consumer attitudes and beliefs have a direct impact on their product return behavior.

Product Return Behaviors of Young Consumers

Demographics such as age, education, income, occupation, household size, and culture have a substantial impact on online product returns (Serravalle et al., 2022). Adult customers are resistant to online purchasing, while young consumers are more likely to use it frequently. According to Statista (2024), Gen Z consumers are more likely to shop for fashion and electronics. The rise of social media throughout Gen Z's lifespan is one of the most significant differences between them and previous generations.

Various age groups respond differently when returning things via online marketplaces. These are the people who were born in the age of high-speed internet and social media, and they share product knowledge by connecting to social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Pinterest, and return their product based on social media reviews (Das & Kunja, 2024). Social media connects buyers and sellers, and product reviews influence the product return decisions of young consumers. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to retain young consumers in online fashion retailers due to their knowledge regarding technology and products. Furthermore, there is a high tendency for unnecessary ordering and increasing product returns because of lenient return policies (Saarijarvi et al., 2017). Sometimes the return policies of the retailers also lead to an increase in the online product returns among customers.

Although young consumer behavior regarding product returns is recognized (Das & Kunja, 2024), it has not been studied in-depth, especially in emerging markets like Sri Lanka. Most existing studies on online product returns focus on developed economies such as the USA (Wang et al., 2019), China, and Australia (Foscht et al., 2013). This research aims to fill the gap by exploring the factors influencing online product returns among young female consumers in Sri Lanka.

Research Questions

What factors influence online product returns of fashion products of young female consumers in Sri Lanka?

What are the recommendations of young female consumers to reduce online product returns?

What are the fraudulent strategies used by young female consumers to return fashion products?

Research Objectives

To identify the factors that influence online product returns of fashion products of young female consumers.

To identify the recommendations of young female consumers to reduce online product returns.

To identify the fraudulent strategies used by young female consumers to return fashion products.

3. Research Methodology

The researcher's primary goal in this study is to investigate the product return behavior of young Gen Z female consumers in the fashion industry. Furthermore, the researchers are focusing on examining fraudulent behaviors related to consumer online product returns from the standpoint of customers and small fashion retailers conducting business via social media. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling. Before the interviews, their demographics were explored, and they were asked questions such as, "Do you shop online?", "How often do you shop online?", "What types of products do you purchase?", and "How often do you return products ordered online?". According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the determination of sample size should be based on the principle of informational redundancy, meaning that sampling can stop when no new information is gained from additional participants.

Therefore, the researchers concluded the interview process after conducting 23 interviews, comprising 12 with sellers and 11 with buyers. This decision was made because no new insights emerged after the first 10 interviews with both sellers and buyers. The length of the interviews varies between 20 minutes to 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted through mobile phone calls. The study's respondents were chosen via purposive sampling. Interview questions were prepared by using the previous literature. Researchers transcribed the interview data and data were analyzed by using the content analysis technique.

Table 01 :Profile of the Sellers

Respondent	Type of Fashionwear	Location
Respondent S01	Clothing	Online Store
Respondent S02	Clothing	Online Store
Respondent S03	Footwear	Online Store
Respondent S04	Footwear	Online Store
Respondent S05	Clothing	Online Store
Respondent S06	Footwear	Online Store
Respondent S07	Clothing	Online Store
Respondent S08	Footwear	Online Store
Respondent S09	Footwear	Online Store
Respondent S10	Clothing	Online Store

Source : Authors own creation

Table 02: Profiles of the Customers

Respondent No	Location
Respondent 01	Homagama
Respondent 02	Kottawa
Respondent 03	Borella
Respondent 04	Maharagama
Respondent 05	Dehiwala
Respondent 06	Borella
Respondent 07	Rajagiriya
Respondent 08	Homagama
Respondent 09	Ratmalana
Respondent 10	Biyagama

Source : Authors own creation

4. Analysis and Discussion

In this study, the researchers provided the factors that lead to an increase in online product returns, as well as customer recommendations to retailers to prevent returns. Furthermore, in this study, researchers discovered consumers' fraudulent behaviors on online product returns for fashion products.

Factors that Cause to Increase in Online Product Returns

Many factors influence the return of products. The researchers identified the following aspects as important concerns for online product returns connected to fashion products.

Customer Requirement Mismatch

Color Mismatch

The color mismatch is a primary reason why young female shoppers return fashion merchandise. Respondent One provided the following view:

"The color on the website does not match the actual saree. In social media, a lot of product, pictures are too edited and do not reflect the true color of the product"

(Respondent 01)

I ordered a dress that was customized to me from an online store but after receiving the product the colors did not match the photos the main reason is the photos are too much edited and it was too disappointing"

(Respondent 03)

Many retailers do not present the true colors of their products on their social media pages. Most of the images related to fashion products are too much edited by using photo editing software.

Material Mismatch

Material is another major factor that is causing online product returns. Customers do not have the chance to touch and test the product in online ordering. Therefore, there is no possibility to test the material of the product. Respondents one and Five provided the following views:

“Another issue related to online purchasing is material because we can’t touch the product. Therefore, material is a huge problem because women are very much concerned about the material.

(Respondent 01)

“In one order I asked for cotton material, but they mistakenly sent another material. They were unable to meet my requirement, therefore, I returned the product”

(Respondent 05)

Size Guideline Mismatch

Sizing mismatch is also a major reason for online product returns, even if companies have stated sizing charts on their social media sites. Respondents 01, 05, and 06 and 9 commented on the size mismatch as follows.

“Size is also a big issue, but they provide size guidance. But I returned a piece of cloth due to size difference”

(Respondent 01)

“Although size guidelines exist, clothing may not always fit the body”

(Respondent 05)

“I ordered a medium-sized clothes piece, but it was too huge for me”

(Respondent 06)

"I purchased a shoe from a Facebook online store. After receiving the order, the shoes do not fit my foot size. Therefore, I returned the products immediately."

(Respondent 09)

Quality

Women are particularly concerned about the quality of fashion products. Quality is also a big worry, which is leading to an increase in online product returns. Customers are more likely to return things when the expected quality falls short of the actual quality. Respondents 3 and 4 commented as below.

“When I’m seeing from the photos the clothes looked like a quality product, but it was not in good quality”

(Respondent 03)

Cultural Beliefs

Some customers order clothes and other fashionable products for experimentation purposes. There are acceptable conventions and attitudes in society about fashion in Sri Lankan culture. Some feminine trends are not socially acceptable. Therefore because of these reasons, customers tend to return the products.

"I have purchased a product from an online clothing store to try that product. According to my perspective after getting that cloth I felt that the cloth was not suitable for me. It looks better with the model in the photograph, but it is not fitting for me because of the culture and my perspective"

(Respondent 01)

As girls, society expects us to wear attire that suits our culture. I ordered a top from an online site, and my body is overexposed. Therefore, I returned that top."

(Respondent 04)

Late Deliveries

Sometimes retailers fail to deliver products on time, which causes many customers to be frustrated and tend to return the product. Some customers order customized products for special plans, such as attending weddings and celebrations, and if the products arrive late, they are displeased and return them. Respondents 6 and 04 commented on the above as follows.

"I ordered a gown for an event, but the online shop failed to deliver it on time. As a result, I was disappointed and returned the product once I received it because there was no purpose for the dress after the party."

(Respondent 06)

"I ordered a customized outfit item to attend a wedding ceremony, but I did not receive it on time, therefore I returned the outfit"

(Respondent 04)

Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that there will be mental discomfort feelings among people when there are beliefs and actions that are inconsistent and contradictory. When ordering fashion products through online platforms, buyers feel that their expectations and ideas about the product will align with their experience with the product. For example, a consumer selects a specific size of fashion wear based on the size charts on the retailer's social media site, but the product size does not meet their expectations. The consumer will be dissatisfied because of the mismatch in actual and expected situations and tend to return the product. Consumers' online product returns increase due to contradictions between their expectations and the real situation in terms of quality, size, price, material, and color.

Recommendations from customers for online product retailers to reduce online product returns

The researchers discovered the customers' suggestions to online fashion retailers to lessen their online product returns.

Share Accurate information with the customers

Most retailers are not sharing accurate information about the products to the customers. Therefore, respondent 08 and 06 presented their views on the above recommendation as follows:

"The main reasons for returning the product are color mismatches, problems with sizes, and problems with material specifications. Therefore, retailers need to share accurate information with the customers and it's

not ethical to sell the products by hiding the information “

(Respondent 08)

“Present accurate information to the customers as an example some retailers do not mention the material, colors, length of the dress, or size guides on their pages. As well if they are using a model, they need to mention the size of the model. If there are full details it will reduce the online returns”

(Respondent 06)

The disclosure of false product information has a significant impact on the increase in online product returns. Customers think that providing correct product information is the most effective approach to prevent online product returns.

Present their certificates on their social media pages

Businesses can get many certificates, including registration, achievement, and more. Displaying these on their pages can build trust in online shops because they can add their reviews to their pages. Respondents 7 and 5 presented their views as follows:

“ If there are certificates and achievement, they can present them on their social media sites and they are more valuable than customer reviews because now it’s very easy to prepare fake customer reviews”

(Respondent 07)

"You have to show the trustworthiness of the social media page because numerous scams currently exist in Sri Lanka, and they can include a video of the seller which will create trust among the customers"

(Respondent 05)

To gain the customer's trust over business social media retailers need to present their content on their pages in a trustworthy manner and presenting certificates on their websites and social media pages will increase trustworthiness.

Informing of terms and conditions related to the Return Policy

Most of the customers are not aware of the product return policies regarding online sales. To reduce online purchase returns customers should know the policies of the retailer. Most consumers are not aware of the return policies related to online purchases. Therefore, online retailers must disclose accurate information regarding the return policy.

“ Retailers need to present their return policies to their customers. In most social media sites, we cannot see the online return policies of the retailer”

(Respondent 04)

“Mentioning the return policy is very good because I think most consumers are not aware of the return policies regarding online purchases”

(Respondent 01)

Deliver the product on time

Some online fashion retailers are not delivering their products on time. This is a major concern for consumers to return products. Respondent Five presented her view as follows:

“To reduce the online returns retailers must send the goods on time”

(Respondent 06)

Fraudulent Practices of customers when returning the products

Customers engage in a variety of fraudulent techniques when returning purchases online, particularly fashion products. The researchers discovered the following fraudulent practices of customers when returning the products.

Intentionally Damaging the product and leaving bad reviews

If a customer is dissatisfied with the product specification, they may purposefully damage the goods and send them to the store. Respondent 07 mentioned her view as follows.

“Especially on second-hand clothing, there may be damages. For instance, if a zipper is damaged some customers are damaged that again intentionally to return the product and most of them leave a bad review by posting photographs of damages on our social media pages ”

(Respondent S07)

False negative customer reviews will cause a loss of business. Because it will damage the retailer's reputation, this is a major issue for online shops.

Refusing to pay for the delivery

Some consumers are rejecting the product and refusing to pay cash on delivery fees and courier charges. This is a common fraud committed by online shoppers. Respondent S03 presented his view as follows:

“ Some consumers are not paying for cash on deliveries, and we have to incur courier charges, and packing costs to deliver the product. More frequently we have to bear that cost by ourselves if the consumer returns the product ”.

(Respondent S03)

Circumstances beyond the seller's control

The seller is unable to regulate certain situations, such as postal strikes and delayed courier delivery. These circumstances will lead to late product deliveries. Respondents S07 and S01 presented their opinion as follows:

“ There are postal strikes, late courier deliveries due to the faults in Courier company caused to delays in product deliveries and sometimes customers will return the product but these things not controllable”

(Respondent S07)

"Sometimes there are circumstances which are not under our control, such as courier delivery delays, broken packages owing to the carelessness of the courier business, delays due to weather conditions, and these incidents will lead to delivery delays, broken products”.

(Respondent S01)

Although the vendor has no control over the aforementioned circumstances, some buyers frequently return products. This is also an unethical online return practice for customers.

Placing the order without making the necessary payment upfront and not buying the product

Online shops have close customers. There are instances when people order a product without paying a deposit and decide not to purchase it. Respondent S04 presented her view as follows:

“Some loyal and Trustworthy customers are asking to keep the product for themselves, but they are not paying any advance for that. Finally, they are not buying that product. Fashion products are quickly getting outdated because of the above reason we lose a lot of sales”.

(Respondent S04)

“Product return’ is an activity initiated by consumers, which involves taking back the previously purchased product to its source and successively receiving either a refund within the original type of payment, exchange for one more item, or store credit” (Ambilkar et al., 2022). According to Wachter et al. 2012, online returns have three dimensions such as planned or unethical returner, eager returner, and reluctant or educated returner. Planned or unethical returners purposefully return the product; eager returners feel pleased after completing the return process; and reluctant or educated returners feel guilty about their return.

5. Conclusion

E-commerce is growing rapidly worldwide, with the online fashion industry becoming popular among young female consumers. People are increasingly shopping online due to lower prices, a wider selection of products, and convenience (Saarjavi et al., 2017). However, online product returns present a major challenge for e-commerce businesses. In Sri Lanka, consumers have limited knowledge of online retailers' return policies for fashion products. This study aims to identify the factors influencing online product returns in the fashion industry and gather recommendations from consumers on how retailers can reduce returns. The study also explores the rising issue of fraudulent return practices among young female consumers in Sri Lanka (Ulku & Gurler, 2018). The findings are valuable for online fashion retailers looking to reduce returns and improve their return policies. Although the topic of online product returns is relatively new, it is highly relevant from both a practical and theoretical perspective (Saarjavi et al., 2017).

Das and Kunja (2024) identified several reasons for online product returns, including delayed delivery, compromised delivery, incorrect products, and misleading advertisements. In this study, the researchers identified customer requirement mismatch, cultural beliefs about clothing, and delayed deliveries as key factors contributing to online product returns among female consumers. Researchers identified intentional product damage, refusing to pay for the delivery, Placing the order without making the necessary payment upfront, not buying the product and circumstances beyond the control of the seller. The buyers suggested several mechanisms to reduce online product returns such as Sharing accurate information with customers, presenting their certificates on social media webpages get trust, informing terms and conditions related to the return policy, delivering the product on time.

This study examined the reasons behind online product returns among young female consumers in Sri Lanka's fashion industry. Key factors included mismatched customer expectations, cultural beliefs about clothing, and delayed deliveries. The study also identified an increase in fraudulent return practices. To

reduce returns, online retailers should better align their products with customer preferences, ensure accurate descriptions, and deliver products on time. Addressing cultural factors and improving customer service can also help. This research adds valuable insights to the limited understanding of online returns in developing countries and offers practical recommendations for e-commerce businesses. A key limitation of this research is that data were only collected from the Western Province of Sri Lanka. Future researchers could broaden the scope of the study by exploring different regions or contexts to gain a more comprehensive understanding of online product return behavior across the country.

Competing interest: The authors declare that they have no competing interests

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