Searching Apparel Online: What Words Do We Use?

Diana Saiki, Ph.D.

Ty Stratton

Ball State University, Muncie, IN

Keywords: Google, Apparel Construction Word Searching

Background and Significance: Patterns of searching for apparel products online are important to examine because most consumers (87%) begin shopping by searching online (Alaimo, 2018). For the industry, using concise and accurate words can facilitate clear communication. Organizations such as the ASTM (1996-2020) identify particular words to describe apparel components. It is also an important topic to museums with apparel and textile collections because standardized terminology eases access to artifacts in a digital catalog (e.g., Kirkland et al., 2016). In addition, examining words to describe apparel is valuable to educators when teaching and developing instructional material.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review: Quality is defined as the ‘degree of excellence and conformance to requirements or the extent to which a garment meets expectations’ (Brown & Rice 2011, 46). Quality depends on both intrinsic (physical and performance characteristics) and extrinsic (related contextual variables) properties of a product. Intrinsic physical features include material, construction, and finish. Intrinsic performance properties encompass aesthetics (color, texture) and function (utility). Garment intrinsic features, particularly fit, color, pattern, style, and appearance sway purchasing (e.g., Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, 1990). More specifically, construction features of apparel, such as hem and sleeve type influence fit and style. For example, a low-cap set-in sleeve when the underarm and the side seam are sewn in one step has a looser fit than a sleeve that is set-in when the bodice and the sleeve are sewn before the sleeve is attached (Brown & Rice, 2011).

Google has grown 20% in women’s “best” searchers in the apparel category over the last two years (Duarte & Thomson, 2019). An examination of searching for apparel online found differences in searching terms used based on the type of item. Searching for a dress usually began with the occasion (e.g. “wedding dress”). Gender terms were used when participants searched bottoms, such as “women’s shorts.” This study also found, color terms were commonly used when searching online for apparel.

There are books that identify and define apparel terms, such as *The Visual Dictionary of Fashion Design* (Ambrose & Harris, 2007). In the museum field, there classification software and websites exist such as PastPerfect (2010) where fields and words are found in related drop-down menus and category fields. Within this general cataloging system, clothing categories include “Clothing Accessories,” “Dressing Wear & Nightwear,” “Footwear,” “Main Garment,” “Outerwear,” “Protective Wear,” and “Underwear.” There are also sub-categories identifying the object specifically (e.g “Outwear,” “Dress,” and “Bridesmaid”). The Getty Research Institute’s (2017) *Art and Architecture Thesaurus* (AAT) ® is a website for visual material objects, such as

art and apparel that has terms for controlled description of artifacts. Clothing in this database is grouped by layer of clothing from “underwear,” “main layer,” to “outerwear,” and then by type of clothing (e.g. “dress,” “pants”). Specific terms are also found by style and occasion (e.g. “chemise dress,” “wedding dress”). There are descriptions of garment components (e.g. “sleeves”) and a few terms for style features (e.g. “hanging sleeves”).

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to determine, when searching online, words commonly used for intrinsic construction features of apparel. The specific research questions were: a) What words are commonly used in searching intrinsic construction features of apparel among the general population (GP)? and b) What words are used in searching intrinsic construction features of apparel among trained sewers (TS)?

Method: A survey was developed with two sections. The first section determined education level, sewing experience, and occupation. The second section had pictures of primary garment construction features followed by the open-ended question: “You are searching for this specific clothing feature on Google as pictured above. What keywords would you use to find it?” Twelve images of garment parts were presented: sleeves (n=2), collars (n=4), hems (n=3), and seams (n=3). A follow-up question prompted participants to think about additional terms related to the garment feature. The garments pictured were from a university costume collection. Data were collected six times over a three-month period until theme saturation was reached. The GP participants were contacted through Amazon Mechanical Turk where the survey was available for a week for four separate postings. TS were invited by e-mail and the survey was available to this group for two weeks. To assure theme saturation, the survey was sent to two separate groups of TS.

After data collection was completed, two researchers with formal training in apparel construction analyzed the data. General garment categories were generated through theme analysis of the overall data (van Manen, 1990). Next, a word or phrase that repeated at least twice in the survey results was placed in a garment category.

Results: Thirty-one TS and 686 GP participants completed the survey. Categories found were aesthetics (e.g., party, trendy), construction (e.g. sewing), color, fabrication (e.g. denim), length/fit, quality (e.g. frayed), style (e.g. v-neckline), trim (e.g. bow), and type of garment (e.g. dress). When compared to GPs’ responses, TS were more concentrated. Construction was the most common category (sewing) among professionals. Common terms used in searching for garment features identified by GP participants were garment color and style. These participants also varied the description category more than TS when the angle of the picture (e.g. entire sleeve, close-up of a hem) varied.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Future Research: The results suggest the GP and TS use different keywords to search garment features online. Therefore, when a website focuses on TS (e.g.

education sites) descriptions of garment features can be concise. A website for the GP may require a broader range of terminology. Color was a common category found in this study; this supports previous research about searching on Google (Duarte & Thompson, 2019). However, gender norms were not mentioned even though some garments in the survey were associated with gender (e.g. a dress). Overall, the categories found in this research could be utilized to describe apparel products for sale online or in a digital museum catalog for better retrieval. The results could aid in creating an effective search engine to standardize terms for cataloging historic costume. Further research includes examining one presentation of a garment feature (e.g. close-up of a hem, entire sleeve), developing, testing, administering a multiple-choice survey developed from the results, and examining words associated with additional garment features (e.g. buttons, yolks).

References:

- Alaimo, D. (2018). 87% of shoppers now begin product searches online. *Retail Dive*. Retrieved from <https://www.retaildive.com/news/87-of-shoppers-now-begin-product-searches-online/530139/>
- Ambrose, G. & Harris, P. (2007). *The visual dictionary of fashion design*. Switzerland: AVA Publishing.
- ASTM (1996-2020). *Annual book of ASTM standards*. Retrieved from <https://www.astm.org/BOOKSTORE/BOS/index.html>
- Brown, P. & Rice, J. (2011). *Ready-to-wear apparel analysis (4th ed.)*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.
- Duarte, J. & Thomson, S. (September, 2019). What fashion fans around the world are searching for on google. *Think With Google*. Retrieved from <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/consumer-insights/google-fashion-search-data/>
- Eckman, M., Damhorst, M. L., & Kadolph, S. J. (1990). Toward a model of the in-store Purchase decision process: Consumer use of criteria for evaluating women's apparel. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 8(2), 13-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887302X9000800202>
- Kirkland, A., Martin, K., Schoeny, M., Smith, K., & Strege, G. (2015). Sharing historic costume collections online, *Dress*, 41(2), 107-127. doi:10.1080/03612112.2015.1130394
- PastPerfect. (2010). [PastPerfect 5.0 Users' Guide \(revision 3\)](#). Retrieved from <https://museumsoftware.com/WebHelp/Frontmatter/PP5-Introduction.html>
- The Getty Research Institute. (2017). *Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT)*. Retrieved from <https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/aat/>
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.