Social commerce – evaluating customer experience in the fashion context

Introduction

Most of the activities in social networks today are not commercial in nature. Sharing opinions, information and photos is mostly motivated by need for interaction and entertainment (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). Such activities, according to Liang and Efraim (2012), have limited commercial benefit. Even though businesses have entered social media with designated brand pages, it is still challenging for them to measure the exact return on investment of their social media presence. Essentially, their approaches use social media as an acquisition marketing tool rather than sales channel.

One of the key challenges facing social platforms, as recognized by both practitioners and theorists, is to implement suitable revenue streams without decreasing their credibility (Webber, 2009). Social commerce aims to bring in a commercial layer to monetize social interactions while fostering interaction with brands and their products. Already social networks and blogs have changed the roles of content producers and consumers significantly. Whereas before professional publishers and journalists provided and circulated information, it is now mostly private users that generate content in digital channels. As users increasingly become content generators, billions of posts, updates, tweets, pictures, videos and opinions from all over the world have filled the cyberspace with inspiration, entertainment and, at times, annoyance.

According to Erickson and Siau (2011) social commerce provides a solution to enable discovery of relevant products in this sea of content, while connecting users to peers at the same time. Hence social commerce sites are addressing the fundamental nature of shopping as a social experience. It is turning products into conversations by utilizing the elements of social media technologies, community interactions and commercial activities (Liang and Efraim, 2012). Previous research in both offline and online consumer behavior has shown that purchasing decisions are strongly influenced by people who customers know and trusts (e.g. Goldsmith and Horovitz, 2006). More specifically Shin (2013) found that subjective norm is a key behavioral antecedent to the use of social commerce.

Another consideration in consumer shopping behavior is the extent to which it is directed and goal-oriented. Erickson and Siau (2011) recognized that traditional search engine marketing assumes that shoppers are certain of their shopping goal, where social commerce marketing accepts that shoppers may be uncertain of their shopping goals and gather inspiration and ideas from their peers. Social recommendations can help to discover things that an algorithm will not. This demonstrates that consumers rely on one another as a trusted and credible source for buying decisions, and are not just relying on information from brand advertising (Pagani and Mirabello, 2011). Today, it can be argued, the most important marketing team, and seemingly also the selling department, are each brand’s customers.

Typologies of social commerce

In their study Liang and Efraim (2012) identified two broad approaches to social commerce: social networks that add commercial functions to their platforms and enable commercial transactions inside the social networking community (1) or e-commerce sites that add a social layer to their store by enabling customer reviews and recommendations as well as other
interactions between customers (2). Inside these general approaches a framework provided by Marsden (2011) can be applied. He proposed a framework of six dimensions that divide social commerce activities into: group buy, rating and reviews, recommendations and referrals, forums and communities, social media optimisation and social ads and apps.

![Figure 1. Comparison of social commerce typologies (Adapted from Liang and Efraim, 2012 and Marsden, 2011)](image)

To be competitive in the market place, two or more of the dimensions are often applied to one website. This provides an opportunity for customers to both receive relevant referrals and discounts, validate these referrals through displayed ratings and reviews and even discuss them in a forum. This layered approach is rapidly being challenged, however, by the emergence of apps and websites which seem to seamlessly integrate those two functions and cannot be classified as neither a retailer nor a social media platform, but a facilitator of social commerce. This is the focus of the current study, and a significant development in the fast-changing field of digital marketing, profoundly changing the purchase and consumption experience.
Customer experience model

According to Pine and Gilmore (2011) we have been moving towards an experience economy. This means, that after commodities, goods and services, businesses now have to find a new opportunity to enhance their product and be able to escape the downwards price spiral. Alongside this development, consumers are also striving towards personalized products through increasingly customized integrations. This is where experiences emerge to create new value, which is often co-created (Storbacka et al. 2012; Wolny, 2009).

Pine and Gilmore (2011) propose that there are 4 realms of customer experience, along two dimensions. The first dimension is at the level of participation, from passive to active. The second dimension describes the level of connection, from absorbing to immersing. This divides the model into four realms of experience: entertainment, educational, escapist and aesthetic. This model forms a theoretical framework for our research and will be applied to social commerce within the fashion context. The implications within the fashion context are discussed in turn for each experience realm below.

![Diagram of the Realms of Customer Experience (Pine and Gilmore, 2011)](image)

**Aesthetics experience in fashion**

According to Pine and Gilmore (2011) the aesthetic experience is where the customer seems the least engaged. Yet, the passive appreciation of style is an important information gathering activity often leading to greater engagement: window shopping or reading fashion magazines are some other activities which would fall under this category. In social commerce terms, the aesthetic appreciation should allow enough time for the users to understand the value inherent in the experiential interface and start interacting with it, without letting them become passive by immersing themselves too deeply into the visual experience (Stephen and Toubia, 2010).

**Entertaining experience in fashion**

The second type of experience on the passive dimension is the entertaining experience. In the entertainment sector the customer passively absorbs an experience but engages on an emotional level. Watching TV is a good example of this category. Applied to user experience on a website this could match experiencing online video content. Many fashion brands (see Wall (2012) for example from Chanel) now use highly stylized video stories as part of their brand image enhancement. Users, equally, are increasingly involved in posting video footage of their fashion or make-up routines. Entertainment can also be achieved through browsing or discovering interesting content, which creates flow within the user behavior. Those are
however, more active behaviors, as discussed in the following sections.

*Educational experience in fashion*
Fashion followers place a strong emphasis on keeping up with the latest and interesting trends. This activity requires significant amount of discovery and learning. Much of the posts on social networks or images on pin boards, such as Pinterest, are geared towards discovery and curation of new looks, products and ideas. The importance of education within the social commerce real, even for a largely hedonic product like fashion, should not be underestimated.

*Escapist experience in fashion*
The escapist customer is completely immersed in the experience as an actively involved participant. Applied to the online world examples of an escapist experience are online games, or a highly engaging app with a user experience that can put the user into a state of flow. Gamification can be described as taking game design techniques to non-game environments (Akerman, 2012). Gamification is a tool that is increasingly utilized to drive engagement on business websites with the aim of immersing users into potentially commercial activities. Features such as virtual models, 3D avatars, as well as countless fashion apps provide users with games-based escapism.

*Proposed Methodology and Expected Contribution*
Those fours realms of customer experience are proposed to form a basis for empirical study, through structured observations of existing social commerce websites and apps in the fashion domain. A cross-sectional sample of ventures catering for different geographical and demographic markets is recommended. Such study will adopt an interpretivist approach allowing for exploration of the key characteristics and features of the new breed of social commerce business models in fashion. It will provide further utility for interface and user experience designers who are shaping customer experiences within the emerging social commerce domain.
References


