

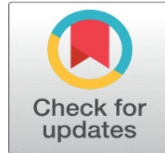
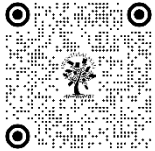
THE EVOLVING STRATEGIES OF FASHION BRANDS TOWARDS CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

Swati Bhalla ¹✉, Dr. Pradeep Joshi ², Dr. Vibhuti Narayan Bajpai ³

¹ Assistant Professor, Amity University, ASFT, Sector 125, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

² Group Addl. Pro Vice Chancellor, Amity University, ASFT, Sector 125, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

³ Professor & Director, Institute of Technology and Science (I.T.S), Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, India



Corresponding Author

Swati Bhalla, swatibhalla@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Customer engagement has been explored in organizational behavior as well as in advertising literature. Talking about customer engagement, when it comes to fashion retail and marketing, fragmented research has been seen on various aspects of customer engagement. This paper aims to bridge this gap by putting together the research done so far in both traditional and digital marketing in fashion. The paper also attempts to understand the path forward for brand interaction vis-à-vis customer.

Driven by advancements in technology and shifting customer behavior, the fashion industry has undergone dramatic changes in the recent years. Marketing strategies have evolved taking clues from these changes in the retail environment. By examining the changing landscape of fashion brand customer engagement, this paper seeks to identify key trends with the goal of outlining a roadmap for further research.

Keywords: Fashion Marketing, Customer Interaction, Brand Customer Relation, Social Media, Customer Engagement, Digital Marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

Interaction between the brand and customer has fascinated researchers for long. A lot of research has gone into this area of brand-customer engagement, but not specific to fashion retail. This paper attempts to study the progression of the marketing strategies of fashion brands for a better customer engagement. By analyzing various scholarly articles, industry reports, case studies and desk research this paper presents an overview of the changing landscape of customer-brand interactions in the fashion industry over several decades.

With the changes in the way customers are buying today, the retail space has evolved. Staying in touch with the customer has become easier in some ways, at the same time, standing out in the crowd has become more difficult. This paper provides insights into the research gone into customer engagement with fashion brands over several decades.

1.1. CONCEPT OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

In the research paper, “Customer Engagement: Exploring Customer Relationships Beyond Purchase” (Vivek et al., 2012), the researchers put together detailed definitions of customer engagement based on literature review in various fields of research. They finally define customer engagement as “the intensity of an individual’s participation in and connection with an organization’s offerings and/or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiate.” Connecting with customers has been the core of any marketing and advertising campaign. Practitioners and academics have both wanted to understand how customer-brand engagement is formed. As far as traditional marketing is concerned, a variety of customer touchpoints, such as advertising, in-store messaging, the retail setting, personal selling, public relations, word-of-mouth, and brand usage experiences, have been known to contribute to customer-brand engagement. Researchers have tried over and over again to understand better, how the brand - customer relationship can be nurtured and sustained over a longer period of time (Bowden, 2009). In this research paper (primarily in the hospitality industry) Bowden has developed a conceptual framework explaining how long-term loyal bonds are formed between a brand and a new vs repeat customer.

1.2. CONCEPT OF TRADITIONAL AND DIGITAL MARKETING

Traditional marketing is reaching out to potential customers using any offline media. Digital marketing is a type of direct marketing that uses interactive media like emails, websites, social networks, online forums, newsgroups, interactive television, mobile communications, etc. to link buyers and sellers electronically (P. Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Digital marketing makes it easier for people to communicate due to the high level of connection, and it is frequently used to sell goods and services in a timely, relevant, individualized, and cost-effective way (Baines et al., 2013). There are many ways in which digital marketing has been defined. In the book *Marketing strategy in the digital age: Applying Kotler’s strategies to digital marketing* (M. Kotler et al., 2020), the authors have defined digital marketing as a set of activities that a company/ person runs on the internet in order to entice new businesses and develop a brand identity.

The definition of internet/digital marketing is as follows: “Achieving marketing objectives by utilizing digital technologies.” (Chaffey et al., 2009).

Online marketing initiatives are a suitable replacement for traditional marketing initiatives, whose effectiveness is difficult to gauge. Several of the old methods and structures used in marketing are becoming irrelevant as a result, changing the way marketing teams approach fashion marketing (Barnes, 2013). In this review paper by Barnes, the researcher puts together the concepts of Marketing and Fashion and explains how the concept of fashion marketing is different to pure marketing primarily because of the ever-changing nature of fashion itself and so should be treated as a distinct area for academic research. In the review paper “Digital Fashion: A systematic literature review. A perspective on marketing and communication”, (Noris et al., 2021) the researchers explain how the world of digital marketing of fashion has emerged due to the amalgamation of digital marketing with branding and the innovative usage of technology embedded with the most recent fashion trends. With the extensive development and research having gone into technology, digital media has become an essential part of life for people. Fashion is an industry which has a relatively short product life cycle. Fashion changes constantly. Fashion marketers should be able to analyze and forecast the fashion trends so as to keep the customer engaged. Today digital media has become a great platform to influence and convert a viewer into a customer. Fashion marketers need to measure and optimize digital media with the purpose of satisfying customers to retain and keep them loyal for a longer time (Rathnayaka, 2018).

In the research paper “Social media’s slippery slope: challenges, opportunities and future research directions” (Schultz & Peltier, 2013) the researchers review and define customer engagement with a brand along a number of dimensions like brand loyalty, active interaction, emotional and rational bonds etc.

2. LITRATURE REVIEW

It's important to note that traditional and digital marketing are not mutually exclusive, and that fashion brands often combine both traditional and digital marketing strategies to create a comprehensive and effective marketing approach in the dynamic fashion industry. In the case study-based research paper “Emotional branding speaks to customers’ heart:

the case of fashion brands" (Y. K. Kim & Sullivan, 2019), the researchers say that product traits, features, and statistics, may be easily forgettable whereas feelings and emotions are not. Customers' opinions of brands are more effectively shaped by personal feelings and experiences than by brand/product specifics. A fashion brand would like to capture these opinions, using either traditional marketing techniques, digital platforms or a combination to both, and use them to build brand loyalty, brand love and brand intimacy.

2.1. TRADITIONAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICES OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

Traditional ways to interact with customers in the fashion industry have been foundational to building brand loyalty and establishing relationships. In the research paper "Keeping customers shopping in stores: interrelationships among store attributes, shopping enjoyment, and place attachment" (Johnson et al., 2015), the researchers identify and test variables like product, price, service, design and atmosphere. This research shows a positive relation between shopping enjoyment and brand loyalty and thus the importance of traditional retailing. Physical retail stores have long been a primary channel for customer interaction. Customers visit stores to browse merchandise, try on fashion products, and receive personalized assistance from sales staff. This direct interaction allows customers to touch and feel the products, ask questions, and receive immediate feedback. Online retailing has challenged the very existence of brick-n-motor stores. Customers have been known to check for designs and sizes offline, but purchase online to get a better deal. This concept is referred to as 'showrooming' as researched through a case study in the research paper "Competitive Strategies for Brick-and-Mortar Stores to Counter "Showrooming" (Mehra et al., 2018). This research suggests price matching, creation of store brands and exclusive tie-ups as good countering measures to showrooming. Showrooming has been challenged with exclusive tie-ups or inhouse brands by various retailers like Tommy Hilfiger and T. J. Maxx.

Events like Fashion shows are platforms for brands to showcase their latest collections and engage with customers directly. History and importance of these fashion shows have been well documented in the research paper "Marketplace icon: the fashion show" (Pinchera & Rinallo, 2021). These events allow customers to experience the brand's vision, aesthetic, and design philosophy firsthand. Fashion shows also provide an opportunity for customers to meet designers, celebrities, and industry professionals adding to a more personal engagement and strengthening the bond between the brand and customer. Lately, many such fashion shows are being organized at off-beat locations like churches, subterranean command bunker, obsolete factories, derelict subway stations, worn-out warehouses etc. Such practices serve a number of purposes, aesthetics being the most significant due to its ability to evoke "authenticity" and subcultural "creativity". This trend has been well documented in the research paper "Industrial Chic: Fashion Shows in Readymade Spaces" (Strömberg, 2019). The qualitative research paper "The anatomy of the luxury fashion brand" (Fionda & Moore, 2009), based on interviews and interactions with 12 luxury fashion brands, showcases the importance of fashion shows and talks about the shows being an excellent marketing communication tool especially in the luxury segment.

Some fashion brands offer personalized styling services to customers, where professional stylists help them choose outfits, offer fashion advice, and create complete looks. These one-on-one consultations provide a tailored shopping experience and build customer trust and loyalty. With development in technology, there are mobile applications that cater to this need too. AI-Stylist (Shinkaruk, 2019) is now being used to assist people with the task of getting dressed, using their pre-existing personal wardrobe.

Fashion brands have been known to print catalogs or look-books showcasing their collections. Customers would receive these printed materials through mail or in-store distribution. These catalogs provided a tangible way for customers to browse and select products, serving as a source of inspiration and information. According to research (Jai & Tung, 2015), US tablet users are not yet ready to stop using print catalogues and only use electronic counterparts. Therefore, offering customers both options can be a better course of action. In the research paper on clothing catalogue shoppers "Benefit Segmentation of Catalog Shoppers Among Professionals" (Y. Kim & Lee, 2000), closely studies the demographics and divides the customers into three categories: Convenience Seekers (fashion conscious professionals), Product Seekers (price sensitive yet fashion conscious), and Inactive Shoppers (price sensitive and not fashion conscious).

Loyalty programs have been a traditional way to engage with customers and reward their loyalty. Fashion brands often offer membership programs that provide exclusive benefits, such as discounts, early access to sales, personalized recommendations, and special events. These programs encourage repeat purchases and foster a sense of belonging. As per the research paper "Perceived Benefits of Retail Loyalty Programs: Their Effects on Program Loyalty and Customer

Loyalty” (H. Y. Kim et al., 2013), some benefits of loyalty programs are monetary savings, exploration, entertainment, recognition and social benefits. In the research paper “Customer Loyalty Programs in Fashion Retail-A Change from Multichannel to Omnichannel” (Klede-Schnabel & Bug, n.d.), researchers conclude that even brands selling online need to embrace digital technology and implement mobile customer loyalty cards especially in the omnichannel world.

Before the advent of digital communication, customers would interact with fashion brands through phone calls or written correspondence. Customer service representatives would assist with inquiries, resolve issues, and provide product information or recommendations via these traditional communication channels. The case study-based research paper “Analysis on the Marketing Strategy of Fast Fashion Brand Zara Based on 4c Theory” (Chunling, n.d.), clearly states that it’s the timely feedback of customers’ requirements and preferences to headquarters that enables ZARA’s products to quickly respond to market changes. The sales staff collects the feedback from customers and promptly transfers the information the headquarters, the next batch of design incorporates the changes and the same is reflected in the next collection.

Fashion brands organize in-store events, trunk shows, workshops, or fashion seminars to engage customers and offer unique experiences. These events often include fashion talks, demonstrations, product launches, or collaborations with influencers or industry experts, providing customers with valuable insights and entertainment. It has been observed that many make-up and beauty product brands have been known to host free workshops that offer advice to anyone who wants to participate. This is an excellent customer engagement strategy. In the research paper “The Influence of In-Store Experiential Events on Shopping Value Perceptions and Shopping Behavior” (Sands et al., 2008), the researchers observe how in-store events dramatically increase customer value perception, shopping behavior intentions, and customers perceived shopping enjoyment.

While these traditional methods of customer interaction still hold significance, the fashion industry has increasingly embraced digital platforms and innovative approaches to adapt to changing customer preferences and behaviors. Combining traditional and modern interaction methods can create a comprehensive and engaging customer experience. Customers have many choices in a multi-channel environment and there are many factors that influence the choice of channel a customer may opt. In the research paper “Customers in a Multichannel Environment: Product Utility, Process Utility, and Channel Choice” (Balasubramanian et al., 2005), the researchers observe how five customer goals drive the utility a customer derives from the purchase process and the purchased products. These goals can be economic goals, a quest for self-affirmation, quest for symbolic meaning which might be associated with the product and with the shopping process, their quest for social interaction and experiential impact, and lastly their reliance on schemes and scripts for shopping. Social interactions are naturally accommodated in a brick-n-mortar store, but needs encouragement in online retailing. By encouraging virtual communities, comments sections and product reviews, online administrators could promote similar interactions. In the research paper “Re-imagine retail: Why store innovation is key to a brand's growth in the ‘new normal’, digitally-connected and transparent world” (Aubrey & Judge, 2012), the researchers propose how in-store setting can be utilized to promote a brand's unique selling proposition. The traditional formats of retail should be treated as a location to encourage brand building and customer relationships. In order to integrate different retailer-customer interaction points, in the physical and digital environments, physical retail space must act as an aggregation hub for customer interaction. In the research paper “Blurring the Lines between Physical and Digital Spaces: Business Model Innovation in Retailing” (Jocevski, 2020), the researcher talks about five key innovation areas for a retail store. These are in-store technologies, the role of sales staff, leveraging a mobile channel, data analytics, and the importance of collaborations. All the above five innovation points can be used to either analyze and/or encourage customer brand engagement.

2.2. MODERN COMMUNICATION PRACTICES OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

During the past three decades, research in the field of retail has moved on from analyzing physical stores to concentrating on subjects concerning multi-channel retail (Hänninen et al., 2021). Digital marketing has significantly transformed the way customers interact with fashion brands. Connecting with users through interesting content and interactive experiences is a crucial component of digital marketing (Rathore, n.d.). Research identifies five perceptions of fashion brands’ contactless marketing initiatives: entertainment, interactivity, trendiness, personalization, and visual engagement (Cho et al., 2022). Digital marketing has made fashion brands more accessible to customers worldwide. Online platforms, such as websites and social media, allow customers to browse and purchase products from anywhere at any time (Parker & Kuo, 2022). This has expanded the reach of fashion brands and provided customers with a

convenient and seamless shopping experience. Based on their prior behavior and preferences, numerous online merchants provide customers personalized pages. Digital marketing enables direct engagement between fashion brands and customers. Through social media platforms, brands can communicate with their audience, respond to queries, and provide personalized customer support. This direct interaction fosters a sense of connection and loyalty between customers and brands. Research shows that one of the key strategies in digital marketing is "storytelling" (Romo et al., 2017) which is used in social media, events, and public exhibits that aim to engage the public and display its history. The rise of influencer marketing has significantly impacted customer behavior in the fashion industry. Customers often rely on influencers' opinions and recommendations when making purchasing decisions (Lea-Greenwood, 2012). Influencers provide authentic and relatable content, showcasing fashion brands' products in real-life situations, which resonates with their followers and influences their buying choices (Crewe, 2013). Digital marketing has empowered customers to become content creators. Through the use of hashtags and brand mentions, fashion brands encourage users to share their experiences and showcase their style using the brand's products (Rocamora, 2012). User-generated content (UGC) (Naab & Sehl, 2017) creates a sense of community and authenticity around the brand (Singh & Chakrabarti, 2021), and customers often trust peer recommendations more than traditional advertising. Digital marketing allows fashion brands to collect and analyze customer data, enabling them to personalize marketing messages and offers (Julien Boudet et al., 2017). By leveraging data such as browsing behavior, purchase history, and demographics, brands can deliver targeted advertisements, personalized product recommendations, and tailored content to individual customers. This level of personalization enhances the customer experience and increases the likelihood of conversion (Bernritter et al., n.d.). Digital marketing has transformed the way customers discover new fashion brands and products, this is particularly important for new brands (Simić et al., 2023). Through search engines (Erdmann et al., 2022) (Klapdor et al., 2014), social media algorithms (Mameli et al., 2022), and targeted advertising, customers are exposed to a wider range of fashion options. Digital marketing has facilitated an omnichannel experience for customers. Fashion brands integrate their online and offline channels to create a seamless and cohesive brand experience. Customers can browse products online, visit physical stores for try-ons, make purchases through mobile apps, and engage with the brand across various touchpoints. This integration allows customers to choose their preferred channels and interact with the brand at different stages of their customer journey. According to the study, omnichannel customers will spend 20% more than multichannel customers (Adams, n.d.). This omnichannel approach doesn't just stop at value brands or lifestyle brands, but extends to the luxury segment as well (Watanabe et al., 2021).

3. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The dramatic shift from traditional to digital marketing has been well documented by researchers. It is noteworthy that traditional marketing laid emphasis on storytelling, this seems to have gotten lost in the overflow of information being generated in the digital world. One key trend seen is that the customers are bombarded with so much information, daily online postings, push-notifications, in-app purchase options and many more marketing tools. This has created a visual chaos. The actual storytelling and brand connect is rather turned into a screaming match for brands, all trying to shout louder than competition. More research is needed into the actual brand engagement created by the social media content. There has been little research into the field. In depth research is recommended to understand how much actual interaction has been created by the social media content on different demographics.

Moving ahead, it is critical to establish a balance between fostering human connection and technological developments while determining the course of the future of fashion retail. The significance of building social links, use of emotional intelligence, and creating genuine relationships will continue to be essential. It is vital to prioritize human connection as a fundamental component of our lives as we navigate the opportunities presented by Artificial Intelligence. This will help ensure that technology serves to complement and enhance human connections rather than to replace it. It is critical that brands stay in touch with evolving customers and changing technology, while ensuring they are perceived as more "human/ emotional" than "artificial" is their "intelligence".

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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