EXPLORING THE INTEGRATION OF BOTH HUMAN AND TECHNOLOGY SERVICE INTERACTIONS IN FASHION RETAILING

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Abstract

Rationale/Purpose

The past few years has seen a growth in consumers' interaction with fashion brands through a combination of various smart devices such as smartphones, laptops, virtual assistants etc. One of the reasons can be that in this digital age, brands seek a way to reach out to consumers digitally by applying strategies of digital marketing such as multichannel, cross-channel and omnichannel strategies. The concept of smart retailing has been shown by some scholars as an innovation for undertaking an omnichannel strategy, which contains the in-store use of smartphones and the use of in-store technologies. Accordingly, consumers are being encouraged to seek information and solution digitally as they are enabled to engage with the brand without human-based services.

On the other hand, in human-based services, more clearly frontline staff has been playing a pivotal role in a retailing and service contexts, by building relationships with customers and acting in a way to reflect brand identity. Retail stores can also be viewed as a sociable platform for consumer and salesperson in which human-based services are vital to an enhanced shopping experience and even offer more as it is a process of value co-creation. Especially in fashion sector, for fashion has its own philosophy with multi-dimensional value and huge emotional and experiential connotation towards consumers. It therefore differs significantly from other consumer products and people are keen to touch fashion products and consult with staff before purchasing.

These raise questions on the interpersonal interaction experience in a technologically enabled fashion store. Most relevant extant studies focus on consumer's adoption to technology, in- store technology-related interactive experience and consumer's preference for different channels. These studies are overly in-store technology-centric and seem to view the technological element as a stand-alone system investigating it through an isolated point of view,

rather than an integrating angle with the social interaction between frontline staff and consumers. Additionally, the voice from generation Z (1997-2012) calls for focus since they are believed to be brought up by technology and specialise in using it in every aspect of their life while being more willing to show their individuality.

Regrading theoretical aspect, Bitner (1992) cultivates a broad conceptualization known as servicescape aiming at the store environment in which consumer and staff communications take place and their experiences are formed. It is drawn on stimulus-organism-response (S-O- R) model which follows the earlier dominant paradigm in marketing and consumer research with a mindset that human experiences are measurable. However, recent years, the development of S-D logic calls for a reconsideration on service and value through a phenomenological lens and underscores a co-creation concept. This research is thus to explorethe co-experience between consumers and staff in smart fashion store and the experiential value.

Design/methodology/approach

Phenomenological approach

Data collection method:

1 Diary as the main method for recording participants co-experience

2 Follow-up Interview as an additional method after reading participants' narrative

3 Autoethnography for store observation

Level of store: Flagship

Sample population: Gen Z

Sampling Strategy: Purposive Sampling

1. Introduction

For research context and rationale, please refer to Abstract Aim

To explore consumers' co-experiences with staff in smart fashion stores and their experiential value

Objectives

1 To evaluate the concepts: experience, co-experience, experiential value and develop a framework built on previous studies to underpin the process in-store experiential value formation

2 To update servicescape framework in terms of its flexibility and interactivity demonstrating technologically enabled servicescape served as an interactive platform to enhance the co-experience between actors

3 To explore co-experience between consumers and staff in smart fashion store through a phenomenological perspective via rigorous data collection and investigate consumers' co-experiences with staff to discover experiential value.

4 To develop better understanding on consumer-to-staff interaction experience in smart fashion store, plus practical insights into the working of frontline personal and the design of an interactive experiential fashion store environment

2. literature review

2.1 Consumption experience and experiential value

2.1.1 Experience in general

What do people describe when talking about an experience? The description actually centres around stories recounted from a certain moment in past few hours, on yesterday or in yesteryear (Jantzen, 2013). A friendly smile of a passer-by when heading to the office in the morning; a sudden noise disturbing one's deep meditation; a trip abroad during holiday; a fine dining or a bitter quarrel with the beloved one are all counted as experiences. Experiences occur in one's daily routine without being planned or designed and daily routine is mundane. Thus, these incident-like experiences are easier to remember and may even influence one's life profoundly such as a catastrophe or bliss (Jantzen, 2013; Zajchowski et al., 2017).

Regarding its semantic meaning in everyday life, the term 'experience' could be one of the few words that people use quotidianly but hard to give a clear definition since it is either a noun or a verb with multiple meanings based to different contexts in daily life (Collins, 2021; Cambridge, 2021). In terms of its conceptual definition in academia, the diverse meanings ascribed to 'experience' in different contexts have derived different conceptualisations in different academic disciplines such as natural sciences, philosophy, sociology, psychology and marketing (Pollio et al., 1997; Carù and Cova, 2003; De Keyser et al., 2015).

A holistic psychology view

Jantzen (2013) applies a psychological approach to delineate and comprehend the term 'experience'. To minimise the confusion and clearly distinguish between the noun 'experience' and the verb 'experiencing' in English, the author refers to its German equivalents: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. According to Jantzen (2013), *Erlebnis* is defined as a present volatile moment of sensing, feeling and knowing the ongoing situation and can be further divided into two subtypes:

1) the act of sensing and feeling;

2) the act of observing autobiographical knowledge;

Erfahrung is defined as "*a coming to know a fact*" which can be either objective or subjective and further divided into three subtypes based on different kinds of memory:

3) autobiographical knowledge (countable) dwelled in short or long-lived episodic memories;

4) practical skills (uncountable) dwelled in implicit procedural memories;

5) conscious knowledge (uncountable) dwelled in generalised episodic memories (Jantzen, 2013; Collins, 2021; Cambridge, 2021).

Accordingly, experience contains both *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* representing a state of mind. *Erlebnis* constitutes the act of having *Erfahrung*, namely 'experiencing' is a process to produce 'experiences' (Jantzen, 2013) and 'experiences' are the outcomes of the past experiencing process (Jantzen, 2013; Zajchowski et al., 2017). It is the two forms of experience: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, and the five subdivisions of experience that complicate this term, which are associated with past memories, present events and future imagination. Sundbo (2009) underlines that an experience is a mental journey in which the memory of things happened in past but continuously being kept in mind.

To illustrate, considering the first time visiting a smart fashion store (SFS), the high-tech shopping environment probably disturbs one's already formed knowledge of fashion stores (experience 5: conscious knowledge). This 'first time' visit is the process of 'experiencing 2' (the act of observing autobiographical knowledge) and 'experiencing 1' (the act of sensing and feeling the store environment). After 'experiencing 1' recurs many times, one may learn enough knowledge of a smart fashion store ('experience 5': conscious knowledge) and forget the first time of visiting. Becoming a hardened shopper/user in a specific smart fashion store implies adopting well to in-store technological devices and being familiar with the layout of the store. Learning to use those technological interactive terminal and become a hardened userimplies how knowledge becomes skills through the transfer of different types ofmemory/experience: from 'experience 3': autobiographical knowledge (countable) dwelled in autobiographical memory to 'experience 4': practical skills (uncountable) dwelled in implicit procedural memories.

This instance demonstrates the linkage and transfer between these five types of experience in a linear manner and it starts with the experiencing process of the smart fashion store. Indeed,

when it comes to describing and investigating human experiences in a certain environment, the environment per se is often viewed as the external stimulus by which individuals' experiences are directed as their emotions change, according to Mehrabian and Russell (1974)'s stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model and atmospherics (Kotler, 1973). These environmental psychology frameworks approach human experience at individual level where experiences are measured by three emotional dimensions: arousal, pleasure and dimensions (Bakker et al., 2014). Based on emotional responses, experiences are evaluated (Bastiaansen et al., 2018). This environmental psychology standpoint is based on one of an assumptions belonging to Cartesianism which believes that human experiences are measurable and determined by "structural mechanisms" (Thompson et al., 1989). Additionally, In the early 1990s, drawn on Mehrabian and Russell (1974)'s S-O-R model, Bitner (1992) cultivates a marketing environmental theory named 'servicescape'. Although it still pays attention to the effects from stimuli in an environment towards human responses, servicescape nevertheless carries a broader angle covering not only emotional states but internal cognitive and interpersonal interaction among people within a place as well (Bitner, 1992).

Contrary to S-O-R model, Jantzen (2013) avers that experiencing is not only simply started with the process of responding to a stimulus. Rather, an experiencing process could also dwell in one's practical skills (experience 4) and conscious knowledge (experience 5), not only being elicited by one's actually executing the skill but also by one's thoughts, alongside Pollio et al. (1997) who argue that 'thinking' as a process of being aware of an idea is a kind of 'experiencing'. For instance, thanking about a scene of farewell or divorce may cast sadness, while dreaming about going shopping and wearing new garments could elicit enjoyment, which may become motivation for having real shopping experiences. Importantly, during the process of experiencing, one's autobiographical knowledge/memory (experience 3) of the past relevant events may also emerge spontaneously (Jantzen, 2013) and the remembered experiences can be influential or even more powerful dominating over the current experiencing process (Zajchowski et al., 2017).

As such, an experiencing process contains the act of sensing and knowledge gaining during the process. The sensing and feeling process may generate subjective knowledge which affects the experiencing one (Jantzen, 2013), while objective knowledge may engage or hinder the experiencing one emotionally and sensually (Kotler, 1973) who is simultaneously being affected by past autobiographical knowledge/memory (Jantzen, 2013). By comparison, although Mehrabian and Russell (1974)'s S-O-R model gives a detailed investigation of sensing and feeling process, it does not involve the three types of *Erfahrung/experience* in Jantzen (2013)'s work. In other words, although S-O-R model provides insight in emotional responses in a process of experiencing, it fails to capture the dynamic nature of human experience which changes over time. It is hence more like a snapshot aiming at a static moment,rather than a holistic point of view on human experience as the present sensing and feeling blends with the past memory and knowledge.

What is more, the five types of experience are interconnected. According to Jantzen (2013), the sensing and feeling process (experience 1) is associated with or impacted by former experiences consisting in practical skills (experience 4) and conscious knowledge (experience

5), which are developed before the current experiencing processes. When the current experiencing moment ends, it becomes a kind of past autobiographical knowledge/memory (experience 3). It may be remembered when one is experiencing something relevant in the further as a cycle (De Keyser et al., 2015; Zajchowski et al., 2015). The recurrence of autobiographical knowledge/memory (experience 3) may be developed into practical skills (experience 4) and conscious knowledge (experience 5) as an experiential learning process (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Furthermore, during the current experiencing process, sensing and feeling (experience 1) often merge with knowledge gaining (experience 2) and could branch out to autobiographical knowledge/memory (experience 3), practical skills (experience 4), conscious knowledge (experience 5) or even a new sensing and feeling process (experiencing 1) (Jantzen, 2013). Thus, the five types of experience are intertwined together influencing the experiencing process and the presence is influenced by the past, which forms the future (Jantzen, 2013). Consequently, experiencing is a changing and ongoing process combining the unknow and therefore curious part with the known and hence presumed part. The unknown part becomes known later in retrospect with the emergence of new potential possibility for the further (Jantzen, 2013).

In the case of visiting smart fashion store (SFS), when one is shopping in SFS, he/she may recall the last time or earlier times when he/she was in this kind of commercial environment. If the one had an unpleasant journey before such as encountering an employee with bad service attitude or a service failure of in-store technology, he/she probably holds low expectations during the current visit. Also, one may already be familiar with the function or layout of the smart store. When it comes to preforming skills in using in-store technology, during the process,one may recall how to use these terminals from past memory. The user ability is hence impacted by the past, which in turn influences the current using process. Additionally, the current SFS journey will become past memory and continuously influences one's next visit to SFS in the further. Moreover, one's SFS experience is generated not only when actually presenting in thestore, but also when one recalls the memory in the past or imagines a scene of SFS in the further.Therefore, the complexity of the term 'experience' is reflected by the "non-sequential nature" of the structure of psychological coherence and ramifications (Jantzen, 2013), rather than a linear structure. Yet the coherence of human experiences always involve the process of immediate feeling and sensing, a kind of bodily action, thereby being deemed to be corporeal and mental phenomena (Jantzen, 2013). Thus, human experience as the present sensing and knowing blends with the past memory and knowledge as well as the hope and worries of further.

The existential phenomenology perspective

There is another approach which investigates human experience based on the "*relationship between the people and their world*" (Pollio et al., 1997, pp. 4). According to Pollio et al. (1997), this standpoint has opened two avenues: one is for psychology known as *Gestalt* and the other is for philosophy known as *phenomenology*. Later, the viewpoint of phenomenology is integrated into the philosophy of existentialism to form a contemporary philosophical standpoint called *existential phenomenology* (Thompson et al., 1989), which is caused by a shared interest of the two academic streams on human experiences in the world in their

quotidian life (Pollio et al., 1997). It seeks a rigorous description of individuals' life from a first-person angle (Thompson et al., 1989), because "*for existential phenomenology, the world is to be lived and described, not explained*" (Pollio et al., 1997, pp. 5) and human experiences could not simply be understood by the directly observable behaviours. (Pollio et al., 1997; Helkkula et al., 2012). This philosophy differs significantly from abovementioned Cartesianism or mechanisms in marketing realm as human experiences under existential phenomenology are not as measurable and calibratable as it is under Cartesianism or mechanisms (Thompson et al., 1989).

In existential phenomenology, the key characterising property of the moment of experiencing is called 'intentionality', a concept which should not be confused with 'intention' (Pollio et al., 1997). When people intend to do something, it implies a planned agenda to be conducted (Cambridge, 2021), while 'intentionality', in phenomenology, is a kind of description of a "*configuration of person and world*" as the basic structure of the relationship between individuals and contexts they live (Pollio et al., 1997). For instance, in a commercial place like fashion store, person A does something which makes person B experience as annoying but then person A says that 'sorry, I did not intend to annoy you'. It means that person A had no plan to annoy person B. Yet, regarding intentionality, person A is experiencing person B's being annoyed, whereas person B is experiencing his/her whole world as annoying. Here intentionality as a description of the structure of the circumstance, although participants' individual engagement are different under the circumstance (Pollio et al., 1997).

Another instance considering one is browsing in a fashion store, at this moment, the store environment (e.g. the design style or artefacts) is likely what the one pays attention. Then his/her phone rings and at this very moment, the store environment suddenly fades away into background and the phone becomes the one's focus. This implies that although a circumstance may emerge with or without one's intention, form a first-person' view, experience is always being directed by some focuses as an intentional phenomena and the focus and the background are never sperate (Thompson et al., 1989; Pollio et al., 1997). As such, experience involves a relationship between the person as experiencer and some facets of his/her own world (Pollio et al., 1997) because one's experience is co-constructed by the subject and some events in his/her own world as a changing process in which one event fades away and another comes as the metaphor of "figure/ground" in Thompson et al., (1989).

The implication from the consideration of Intentionality is that since phenomenology views human experience as *"a relationship between the people and their world*" (Pollio et al., 1997, pp 4), 'their world' at the experiencing moment is formed from various entities including the experiencing one's own body, other individuals and objects, nature or even abstract ideas. In other words, every person's own world consists of different kinds of *otherness* (Pollio et al., 1997) and people gain knowledge about who they are based on their encounters with these *otherness*. Therefore, in a specific circumstance, one's consciousness reveals who they are and what is important for him/her (Pollio et al., 1997). For example, in the same SFS, person A being attracted by a technologic terminal and person B totally ignoring the terminal are likely two very different persons. This also implies that human experiences are closely associated with the context, thereby being neither completely positioned 'inside the person' nor

completely 'outside the person' (Thompson et al., 1989). It is fundamentally related to the context the one presents.

Moreover, in existential phenomenology, individuals' experiences can never be examined apart from a socio-related framework such as language and culture (Pollio et al., 1997), a kind of institutional structures (Akaka et al., 2015; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). A comprehensive understanding of one's specific experience requires the understanding of sociocultural, institutional and situational aspects of one's life as the "*regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life*" (Scott, 2014, pp. 56). For example, visiting a fashion store may be experienced as a journey for hunting for sales with excitement as an adventure for someone, whereas it may be also experienced as a sheer chore for another one. The reflection of experience (visiting a fashion store) and the interpretation (adventure and chore) "*are but two of many culturally given possibilities*" (Pollio et al., 1997, pp. 8).

Thus, from a phenomenological perspective, human experience is reflected by the process of experiencing, rather than "*something precedes or flows from it*" (Sadler, 1978, pp. 160 cited by Pollio et al., 1997). Borrowing Jantzen (2013)' s terminology, phenomenology goes deep into *Erlebnis* and seeks the meanings inherent in or derived from *Erlebnis* which nonetheless is simultaneously influenced by one's *Erfahrung.* Nozicks (1974) (cited by Jantzen, 2013) argue that: people actually do not pursuit pure feelings such as enjoyment and pleasure. Insteadpeople aims at the experience of being a specific person who is having these feelings. Jantzen,(2013) adds that the awareness of such a process potentially reinforces or challenges one's autobiographical knowledge and this conveys a touch of allusiveness of generation of experiential value, referring to Holbrook, (1999).

Additionally, Bitner's servicescape theory conveys a sense of configuration of all components within a place by which individuals experiences and interactions are influenced (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008). This holistic perspective on servicescape is somewhat the same as abovementioned Gestalt psychology (Pizam and Tasci, 2019) which is led by early phenomenology (Pollio et al., 1997), thereby also similar to the phenomenological concept 'intentionality', because they all convey a sense of a basic configuration of person and a situation. Although this little similarity does not mean that Bitner cultivated servicescape theory based on a phenomenological lens, it does leave some leeway to a shift of its philosophical assumption from Cartesian to existential phenomenology. The said concepts of experiential value and servicescape will be elaborated in the following chapters.

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