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The examination of tech disruptions' patterns on the consumer journey

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Abstract

The integration of new technologies into the lives of consumers has caused significant changes in their journey, while directly altering consumers' moment of truth. This study proposes a theoretical framework depicting recent innovations, the ongoing integration of digital touch-points within the consumer journey, and their overall impact on the first moment of truth (FMOT). The paper also discusses the role of digital social responsibility in the consumer journey, mediating the relationship between the used touch points and customers' advocacy to the purchased brand. The proposed conceptual model is based on a thorough enquiry of the effects of technology on purchasing decisions and brand advocacy. It incorporates a comprehensive updated consumer journey across four stages, namely: (1) awareness and consideration, (2) engagement and purchase, (3) delivery, and (4) brand advocacy, mediated by digital social responsibility. As such, the paper reflects the ongoing integration of digital touch-points within the consumer journey. As the role of multi-channel marketing in the consumers' consumption journey and its subsequent impact on the FMOT is still under-researched, the current study enhances the understanding of the new consumer journey allowing marketers to tailor and enhance the user experience at various touch-points.

Keywords. First Moment of Truth; Consumer Journey; Technology; Retailing; Digital Touch-Points; Digital Social Responsibility.

1 Introduction

The majority of human activities have increasingly become digitized with a large number of consumers, especially millennials, adopting technology in most aspects of their lives. The integration of new technologies into the lives of consumers, as well as the proliferation of virtual communities and applications have created a radical change in consumers' awareness, decision-making and adoption processes (Williams *et al*., 2009). Indeed, the technological expansion has led to the significant development of the digital information age, which has consequently led to the rise of a demanding, technologically-aware consumer who is constantly connected and searching for innovative alternatives (Racolta-Paina and Luca, 2010).

Technological expansion has caused significant changes in the consumer journey as consumers are constantly expected not only to understand, but also to adopt the technology so as to have a full-fledged brand experience. While con-

sumers nowadays anticipate continuous innovations and updates, these rapid changes might conversely complicate the information search and the related decision-making process (Lowe and Alpert, 2015). These technologically-driven changes are altering consumers' moment of truth, or the moments at which a given consumer interacts with a company, through a digital touch-point, hence forming an impression about it (Ertemel and Basci, 2015). Digital touch-points are online or virtual areas of contact between a brand/service provider and the end user. They are considered one of the main elements of the overall service experience that allow users to connect both with other users and companies through a collaborative two-way communication platform (Cawsey and Rowley, 2016).

This study aims to advance existing knowledge on the current consumer journey in light of the continuous innovations that are altering the way consumers look for and make use of services. The study hence conducts an enquiry on the technological proliferation into the consumer journey. In fact, it proposes a pioneering service-oriented consumer journey framework, identifying the impact of recent innovations on the overall journey and the related purchase decision.

2 Conceptual framework: the updated consumer journey

The original consumer journey is composed of three main stages, namely: (1) consideration, (2) evaluation, and (3) purchase (Hudson and Hudson, 2013). Due to the major expansion in technology, delivery is becoming a crucial part of the journey as a sizeable amount of transactions are happening remotely (Ramadan et al., 2017). The advances in new technologies have significantly altered each of these stages, affecting directly the consumer decision-making process (Ertemel and Basci, 2015). Businesses today must vie for consumers' attention by identifying the relevant touch-points of each stage consumer journey and creating new engagement dynamics. The increase in the number of consumer touch-points promotes awareness and helps improve corporate image and reputation (Cavender and Kincade, 2015). Furthermore, it positively affects the consumer decision-making process as it reduces selection and purchase risks (Sasmita and Mohd Suki, 2015). This is especially true in the case of online touch-points since they create multiple contact points with the consumer. Accordingly, this paper proposes an update of the consumer journey taking into account several new technology-driven touch-points that would impact the consumer decision-making process.

2.1 Awareness and consideration touch-points

First, the 'awareness and consideration' stage is considered to be highly critical to businesses since it is the time at which consumers first notice a service, and subconsciously assess it (Becker et al., 2020). If the service is intriguing to the consumer, he/she will later recall it, alongside other alternatives in his/her mental consideration set, when contemplating a purchase decision (Hammedi et al., 2015). The rise of technologies such as (1) social media platforms, (2) augmented reality, and (3) geofencing applications are altering the 'awareness and consideration' stage of the consumer journey since consumers are now open to marketing messages through technologically-driven platforms. These touch-points are perceived

as non-intrusive, entertaining and easy to control when compared to more traditional marketing counterparts (Hutter *et al.*, 2013). As a matter of fact, digital touch-points increase service awareness and exposure, which generates buzz, word-of-mouth, and overall consumer interest and consideration.

Nowadays, one of the most popular digital touch-points include social media platforms that encompass social networking, blogging, as well as video and photo sharing websites (Cawsey and Rowley, 2016). The growth of such platforms has led many to question the viability of marketers' control over corporate image as these applications elevate the consumers' power by offering them the chance to freely communicate and share their experiences in real-time.

The great rise in the popularity of online communities has led to a great interconnection between the real and virtual worlds, which has led to the development of AR applications (Rauschnabel, 2019). The gamification of AR has been growing extensively as is manifested in the increasing popularity of digital games. AR platforms differ from virtual platforms in that they superimpose 3-D digital elements into one's physical surroundings, which can be viewed on digital devices (e.g. smartphones and tablets) that offer users an enhanced, hybrid version of their real-time environment (Irizarry *et al.*, 2014). This form of marketing is highly attractive to businesses today as it is less costly than traditional communication channels, allowing for real-time access of information at any location.

The latest trend in digital contact points with prospective consumers today is geofencing, a location-based targeting technique that utilizes positioning technologies in order to send personalized mobile messages to individuals passing by a specific geographic area. This technology creates a GPS-based virtual area, or fence, and transmits information, such as promotions and discounts, to any mobile device within this perimeter (Pak, 2014). This strategy is garnering a great deal of attention from businesses since temporal closeness to a certain service or brand enhances consumer message evaluation and real-time decision-making (Khajehzadeh *et al.*, 2015), leading to an actual purchase.

2.2 Engage and buy touch-points

The 'engage and buy' stage, which follows the 'awareness and consideration', denotes the moment at which a consumer is exposed to a given service/brand and driven to buy it through any digital platform or channel. This interaction is driven by recent growing technologies such as: (1) *Internet of Things (IoT),* (2) *Messenger bots*, and (3) *virtual stores.*

The advances in the internet have led to the generation of the Internet of Things (IoT), connecting various physical appliances and everyday objects via wireless networks and smart sensors. The latter has led to the generation of intelligent digital assistants, such as Siri and Alexa, designed to communicate with consumers, answer their queries, and anticipate their needs. Hence, the growth of IoT has altered the companies' strategies from a direct, dual relationship between the consumer and the firm to a multi-agent network where consumers interact with various entities and players (Ramadan *et al.,* 2021). Consumers, therefore, are exposed to a diverse range of brands in real-time and from different locations.

Moreover, messengers or chat bots which are chat room-based interfaces that

can stimulate conversations with consumers through the utilization of artificial intelligence (AI) systems are reinventing the essence of customer service. Chat bots are rapidly growing in popularity in the marketing field as they can mimic human communications and interactions, which consequently allows the application to answer in real-time a large number of consumer personal queries, process product orders, and provide suggestions and recommendations in a personalized manner (Singh, 2016).

Advances in digital technologies have also led to the evolution of virtual stores, that replicate the traditional store environment and offer consumers a full 3D view of the products available in a digital environment (Bressoud, 2013). The growth of such stores affect both retailers and brands as consumers now interact with the brands at new locations instead of the traditional store environments. Indeed, brand presence in virtual worlds positively affects consumer attitudes and enhances purchase intentions (Wu and Chang, 2016).

2.3 Technology-facilitated delivery service

The 'engage and buy' stage is followed by the crucial phase of delivery. Indeed, research shows that effective and efficient delivery and after-delivery services are essential determinants of consumer retention (Campbell and Frei, 2010). This is especially important to firms hit by a crisis - such as the Covid-19 pandemic - and looking to re-instate their previous performance. Innovative online solutions that replace interpersonal contact should be able to finalize services' ordering and delivery. Accordingly, some businesses nowadays started innovating in this area by utilizing technologically-facilitated delivery services, such as: (1) *drones*, (2) *Uberization*, and (3) *self-service technologies* to enhance the consumer journey and successfully retain the consumers.

Drones, also known as unmanned aerial vehicle (UAVs), are remotely operated flying machines that utilize GPS and Wifi for navigation and communication purposes that have been garnering great interest from businesses. This area of delivery is expected to advance greatly since drones are likely to allow for greater effectiveness and efficiency when compared to their traditional delivery counterparts (Ramadan *et al*., 2017). Product purchased online are usually delivered in a matter of days or weeks; however, the utilization of drones is meant to allow same day delivery sometimes within a matter of mere hours, leading to a more instantaneous fulfillment of consumer needs, which in turn enhances overall satisfaction and loyalty (Chen *et al*., 2021).

Another method facilitating delivery is to follow the 'Uber' business model, commonly known as the Uberization of delivery. Uberization is the utilization of online applications that allows businesses to allocate delivery to the closest available registered courier or shipper (Szakonyi, 2014). This allows for a faster, consumer-centric approach to delivery, which also comes at a lower cost to the company. The rapid growth in Uberization is in large part based upon the fact that consumers today are less willing to wait for products, and are therefore demanding faster delivery times. Accordingly, marketers are increasingly motivated to employ such methods to capitalize on consumers' willingness to buy and quickly satisfy their needs.

The growth in new technological innovations is leading to a strong consumer preference for and reliance on self-service technologies (SSTs).

2.4 Digital Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has attracted much interest at the academic and practitioners' levels over the past few decades. Engaging in CSR practices has been reported to positively influence not only organizational performance and identity (e.g. El-Kassar *et al*, 2017), but also brand building (Tingchi Liu *et al*., 2014), customer loyalty, and corporate reputation (Famiyeh, 2017). According to the extant literature, CSR practices in general, and those promoted through digital platforms in particular, can enhance stakeholders' engagement, promote consumer trust, and hence generate higher levels of advocacy and loyalty. The four basic dimensions for CSR (Carroll, 1991), namely economic responsibility (organizations' commitment profitability, efficiency, and competitiveness), legal responsibility (compliance with legal obligation), social responsibility (contribution to the social benefit by showing goodwill to citizens), and environmental responsibility (achieving business objectives without compromising sustainability) can now all be transformed to the digital-based framework within which organizations are doing their business (Kollat and Farache, 2017). Communicating CSR effectively and committing to social responsible activities over digital media and touch points can enhance customers to purchase and can influence the stakeholders' perceptions and assessment of an organization, which accordingly promote the image of the organization image (Du *et al*., 2010). In fact, digital social responsibility, or digital platforms used to communicate the CSR of an organization CSR, can foster information sharing, trust enhancement, relationship building, brand loyalty, and customer engagement activities. Previous research reported a mediation role of CSR on the effect of brand awareness on customer loyalty (Chikazhe et al., 2020). Another study (Wang, 2020) found an insignificant mediation effect of CSR on the relationship between brand attitude and willingness to purchase. Moreover, a study investigating the role of digital social responsibility in the social media context found that customers' perceptions of the digital social responsibility practices significantly mediated the relationship between the word of mouth and purchasing intent of customers (Puriwat and Tripopsakul, 2021).
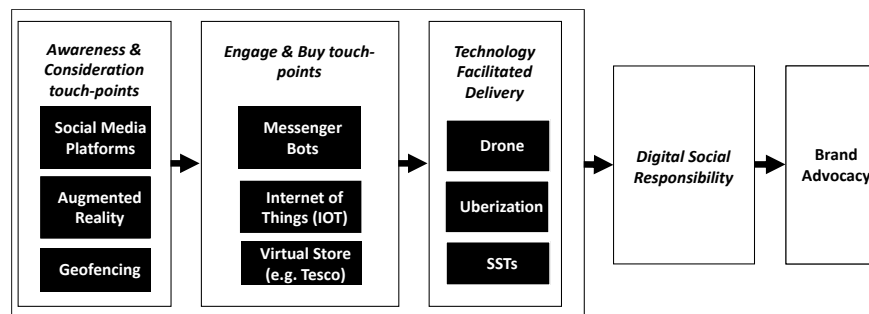
Figure 1: The updated consumer journey

3 Discussion and Implications

The increased digitalization present in today's consumer society has empowered individuals and enabled them to become active players in the value-creation process, while also creating new touch-points for the consumer (Roncha and Radclyffe-Thomas, 2016). In the past, establishing contact with the company and gathering related information were activities limited to the physical realm itself. However, advances in technology have considerably facilitated such interactions through various applications at any time and place (Ramadan *et al.*, 2021). This has led to the creation of Omni-channel marketing, which is the seamless integration of the physical, digital, and mobile experiences. This emerging form of marketing focuses on enhancing interactivity and allowing for a smooth, harmonious experience at all consumer touch-points (Verhoef *et al.*, 2015).

Indeed, the growth of digital touch-points has changed the overall consumer journey. Rather than being solely owned by service providers, touch-points are nowadays strongly affected by consumers. As is evident from the above discussion, consumers are being increasingly exposed to services and products through various new technologically-enabled channels. Indeed, individuals are increasingly seeking services directly through these platforms, as is the case with digital personal assistants and virtual communities. Firms are expected to identify what stage a consumer is at and act accordingly to propel them towards the next level mainly through CSR initiatives. Indeed, previous research examined the communication of a firm's CSR practices and activities through social media platforms (Kollat and Farache, 2017). Cases in point are Seventh Generation, Starbucks, and Cisco who have adopted social media strategies to engage and educate their target audiences.

Big data, electronic communications, useful and persuasive online reviews, and innovations in general can facilitate the management of customers' journey (Ruiz-Mafe *et al.*, 2020). Companies are embracing various technological innovations to appeal to consumers. Nevertheless, the literature lacks a timely understanding and a futuristic view of the consumer journey that encompasses these new, complex, consumer-brand interactions and exchanges that were found to be mediated by digital social responsibility. In effect, this paper develops a conceptual framework for the revised consumer journey that complements and expands upon existing path-to-purchase initial stages. The introduction of the proposed framework implies the development of technologically-facilitated marketing strategies and messages that attract consumers and enhance their willingness to utilize a given service.

4 Limitations and Future Research

This work, like any other, has its limitations. First, this paper is conceptual in nature, hence the presented framework needs further investigation. The model would benefit greatly from empirical data to reiterate on the shifts that are currently occurring in the consumer journey. This manuscript should be treated as an initial framework and guide for future research expanding the understanding of the impact of technology on consumer purchase intentions and behaviors. Interestingly,

the framework could also embed upcoming technological introductions that could impact the consumer journey. Such research would allow companies the chance to integrate their marketing messages across the various digital platforms hereby presented, and accordingly successfully target the needed market segments.

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